Mondaiji-tachi ga iseki kara kuru soudesu yo Volume 04

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竜ノ湖太郎
illustration
天之有
問題児たちが異世界から来るそうですよ？
十三番目の太陽を撃て
角川スニーカー文庫

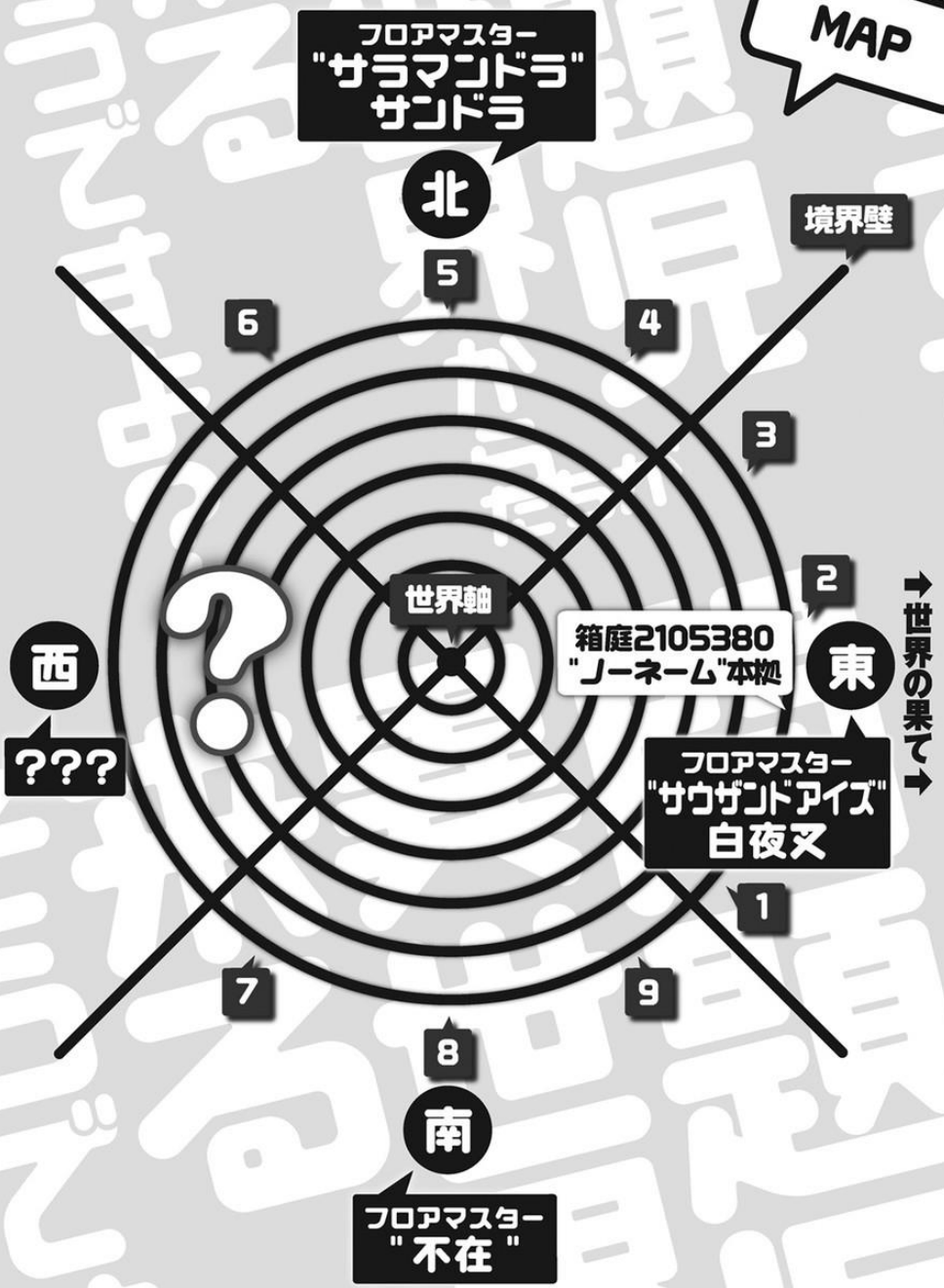
このままじゃ死んじゃうわよ、赤い人？
黒ウサギ殿、何だコレは？
……
……
ペスト
ジン
飛鳥（あすか）

自己犠牲の出来る物分かりの悪い聖者よりも、
そして、勇者になる。
完膚なきまでに救ってみせる！
逆廻十六夜
久遠飛鳥
春日部耀

私の太陽はどこにある――？
レティシア

口絵・本文イラスト／天之有
口絵・本文デザイン／百足屋ユウコ（ムシカゴグラフィクス）

MAP



Character

Prologue

――――――――――Year 2xxx, Kasukabe Hospital. Room 708.

The last time she spoke with her father was in Autumn when she had just turned 11. She could see the indigo-blue skies and the sea from her private hospital room's bed. Her father, who was lost in his many years of travel――-Kasukabe Koumei, had suddenly appeared in front of her, bringing a vast number of stories for her as souvenirs.

"……An animal with the beak of an eagle, and the body of a lion?"

"Yeah. It's called a gryphon. They're brave, tough, and also extremely prideful. They are the kings of the skies and the earth, after all. With their massive wings and powerful limbs which they use to cross the sky, they are the most majestic creatures to exist."

Her father quietly spoke from memory as he looked up at the indigo-blue sky with a distant look in his eyes. Surprisingly, he had paid a visit while being dressed in a formal suit. The father she remembered had always been dressed in some lame clothes, but this was quite a refreshing sight. Rather large in size but a person with a proper stature, her father told her stories in a calm manner while sitting in an upright posture right next to her bed. Dissatisfied with not being able to share these memories with the father she was so proud of, she rocked her legs back and forth sulkily, and murmured yearningly.

"……I want to meet a gryphon too."

"What?"

“I want to become friends with a gryphon, and have me ride on its back……I want to go outside and see the world like you did, Dad.”

The words she spun from her mouth had such a strong tone that it even surprised herself. But it was a wish that wasn’t meant to be. Even though she was born in an era which was said to be boundless for humanity, she was diagnosed with a terminal illness, and left in the hospital. Although she knew she was being selfish, she couldn’t help but say it. Even if she went with her father, her legs which could barely walk on their own would surely end up tripping her father’s as well. To her, who was trapped inside a pure white hospital room, the outside world her father spoke of……a place full of the scent and vivid colors of life, it was like paradise to her. However, her father, who showed no signs of being troubled by her selfishness, gently narrowed his peaceful eyes and softly spoke.

“……I see. Then this must really be the workings of fate.”

“Eh?”

“Yō, I’m going to entrust this to you. It’s something you’ll need more than anything else right now.”

After saying that, her father pulled a pendant out from his shirt, and put it around her neck. At the tip of the pendant was a wood carving piece, which he placed in her hands and said,

“If you have this genome tree inscribed pendant with you, it should prove useful when you meet a gryphon.”

“……This pendant?”

“Yeah. If you have this pendant, any animal would……hmm,”

Her father stopped mid-sentence, and looked over at the calico cat basking in the sunlight near the window. As it yawned with a big ‘nyaa’, her father casually picked up the cat and suddenly tossed it over towards Yō.

“Fugyaa!?”

“Wha, w-wha!”

The calico cat let out a yelp from the sudden act, but managed to land safely. She fell back after receiving this body attack to the chest and hit the back of her head. Unconsciously, she puffed her cheeks at her father and raised her voice in protest——-

“M-Master! Whadd’ya do that for all of a sudden!?”

“I threw you.”

“Izzat right-that ain’t what I was askin’ about, ya numskull!! I’m askin’ why it was ya threw me for!!”

“To tick you off.”

“Izzat so-shut yer trap, ya idiooooot!!!”

The calico cat hissed angrily as its fur stood on ends. A look of feigned ignorance showed on her father’s face. While she held onto the wood carving on her pendant, her mouth hung open as she listened to the exchange between the two people(?).

“……Calico?”

“Yo, what’s up Ojou?”

“…… You could speak a human language?”

“Huh? ……O,ooh!!? You can talk to me now too!?”

Surprised, Calico responded in a Kansai dialect. Hearing Calico speak for the first time sparked confusion in her, but as her eyes and arms shuddered, she hugged Calico with all her strength.

“Incredible! I’m talking to you, Calico!”

“Yeah. This is the power of the pendant that was given to you. If you have it with you, you’ll be able to talk to all sorts of animals. ……But that’s not the only thing it can do.”

Her father reached out, lifting her off the bed and setting her feet down on the floor. There, she was shocked for a second time. Her legs that weren’t even able to stand——-as weak as they were, were now holding up her body.

“……You’re kidding me……!?”

“I’m not. If you have this pendant and come into contact with any sort of animal, your body will become much, much stronger than it is right now. Not only will you be able to get out of this hospital, but you’ll also be able to go to school or out into the town on your own with no problems.”

Saying that, her father let go of her. She wasn’t able to stand for very long, and soon fell back on the bed.

“……If I become friends with more animals, I’ll be able to walk more?”

“Yeah.”

“Will I be able to become friends with a gryphon, too?”

"……Well, I wonder about that. Whether or not you can become friends with a gryphon will be up to you. And if you do happen to meet one, don't get near it without clear resolve. They are highly spirited and prideful. If you are still determined to become friends of equal footing, you must give it your all. ……Even if it means your life."

Her father hesitated and glared sharply at her. Even for words of warning, they had a great deal of weight to them.

"Dad, did you put your life on the line to become friends with a gryphon?"

"Hmm? W,well……I guess I can't deny that. In my case, it was more a fight to the death than a match……No, come to think of it, I did do something stupid. To take on Draco Greif with my bare hands, I must've been drunk, or perhaps just very rash……"

"?"

Her father's voice fell to a whisper as he spoke. His already low voice became even harder to hear. She knew that was her father's habit of inconveniently hiding something, but she let it go anyway.

"Anyway, take care of your friends. When you live on the outside, they will be your most precious fortune."

"……Was it the same for you, Dad?"

"Yeah. If they weren't there for me……I probably wouldn't be here today."

His distant eyes stared at the setting sun. Looking at those eyes, she thought to herself. If, in the future, she made any friends, they would be more important to her than anyone else.

“It’s starting to get dark. I should get going soon.”

“……I see. Then I’ll see you off.”

She’d finally become able to walk. The least she could do was walk her father to the hospital entrance, so she wobbly stood up, but her father seemed troubled and stopped her, so she gave up. Her father clumsily ruffled her hair, and tapered his peaceful eyes.

“——-The next time is in two years to the day. I will come pick you up on the night of the full moon.”

“……Eh?”

“With that pendant, your body will become far stronger than it is now. So, I’ll promise you. The next time, I will definitely——-travel together with you.”

Her father told her these words of promise with a tint of languish in his tone, and left. ——-She was alone in the hospital room, filled with silence. She thought about her father’s promise to her countless times while gently gripping her pendant.

With that day in mind, she spent her days to fulfil her promise. Starting with Calico, she formed ties with various animals, piling encounter upon encounter to build herself up. Her body, which up until then hadn’t even been able to walk, was able to run in just half a year. To her, who had spent half her life in a hospital room, making friends with animals was refreshing and fun. Rather, it was much more difficult to play with friends her age. The people around her and girls her age didn’t believe her

story, and when they ridiculed her father and his stories about the gryphon, there were times when she cried in frustration. From then on, she only made contact with animals. Even if she made human friends, she would have to say her farewells to them in 2 years. Then it would be better not to make any human friends in the first place, and so she put up a wall to protect herself from the people around her.

Over the months, she distanced herself from society, and at last estranging herself from her relatives, leaving her surrounded by nothing but animals. Despite this, she didn't care. 'The next time, I will definitely――-travel together with you.' Just by thinking about that promise……her heart was enveloped in warmth.

﹘﹘﹘﹘﹘﹘Spending those months and years like that for 2 years, she greeted the promised day. The evening breeze blew strongly as she stood in the center of the garden, embracing Calico――-and shedding large tears that ran down her face. 'I will come pick you up on the night of the full moon――-.' That night was supposed to be a full moon. Going by the Moon's periodic cycle, it was supposed to be a full moon. Even though just for this promised night, it had to be a full moon. Passing the fifteenth night, the starry sky that should have welcomed a full moon――-it was slightly waned, and the sixteenth night's moon was smiling. The promise couldn't be kept.

……Her father never came to pick her up.

Chapter 1

Part 1

"……..What a bad dream that was."

Yō tossed around on the thatched straw bed, mumbling. The street lights had dimmed, and it was late in the night. In Underwood's underground city, there is always a cool breeze from the riverside, but at night it becomes a bit chilly. It was probably for this reason that the harvest festival's main game was held in the daytime. Tomorrow would be the eve of the festival when the main game, 'The Horsemen of Hippo Camp', would be hosted. So she wanted to get as much rest as possible, but that dream was badly timed.

(……*Wanting to be friends with a gryphon, huh?*)

Remembering her last conversation with her father, she gripped her pendant. It's been 3 years since that night of a full moon. Although back then, she didn't really bring it up much after people around her had scoffed at her story, but now she could say it with confidence for the dream had just confirmed it— The place her father had travelled to is of this world, the world of Little Garden.

(————,)

Breaking into a smile, she let out a sigh and tried going back to sleep. Indeed, she had said that she wanted to see the 'outside world', but not even in her dreams that she thought of had it as anything more than a metaphor. Her relatives said that her father was a vagrant, but to think he'd leave his daughter to go wandering around in a parallel universe, she was so far beyond anger that she couldn't help but laugh. As she bitterly smiled, Calico, who was on the pillow, sleepily lifted his neck.

"……Ojou? Wus' wrong?"

"It's nothing. Sorry I woke you up."

She apologized as she rubbed Calico's neck. Calico purred in content and curled up into a ball.

(*If I told Calico about what happened to Dad……would he say that we should look for him?*)

She lowered her eyelids and silently grasped her pendant. But that would be impossible, Yō thought. There were three big reasons why Yō didn't go looking for her father after coming to the Little Garden. The biggest reason was that Yō and the others were all summoned from different eras. Being summoned from any era suggested that there was the possibility of being summoned into the Little Garden at any time period. If Yō were to pinpoint her position on the time line, she wouldn't know if her father existed in the 'past Little Garden' or the 'future Little Garden'. If that was the case, there would be no way she could look for him. Another big reason was……indeed, the aforementioned invitation.

'Cast aside your family, your friends, your belongings, and the world, and come to the Little Garden.'

Cast aside your past, your family, and your identity, and come; that one sentence swayed her heart, and was why she was here in the Little Garden. To cast aside the Yō that distanced herself from other people, and only conveyed her heart to animals, for new relationships……to make new friends was the reason she came here.

Izayoi and Asuka also probably cast aside the same things to answer their summons. But she was the only one dragging around her past, which slowed her down.

Moreover, this time she'd tried to cheer on Izayoi, causing issues for the community. She wanted to avoid causing anymore trouble than this.

(*……Come to think of it, Izayoi was supposed to come over tonight, wasn't he.*)

Yō got up from the bed and picked up the cat ear headphones next to the candlestick.

(*……..As I thought, makeshift headphones won't do the job. I should at least win the gift from tomorrow's 'Horsemen of Hippo Camp' as a present……*)

And she'd apologize. They might not forgive her even if she did, but it was a rule of the herd to follow through with one's ideals.

(*It seems Ayesha will also be participating, but I can't afford to lose this time. Tomorrow, the first thing I'll do in the morning , is to go find a Hippocamp I can rely on.*)

She tightened her grip on the cat ear headphones and slipped back into bed.

……But maybe because she was overflowing with motivation, she was so excited that she couldn't sleep. While she thought about how to get to sleep, she heard the sound of heartstrings loudly out of nowhere.

(*……Nn……*)

Bolin , the relaxing sound stimulated her eardrums. It was a sound she'd heard somewhere before, but she was too tired to care. Yō's eyelids became heavy at that moment, and she fell into a deep slumber. Entrusting herself to a gentle Sandman , her consciousness faded and then.

A streak of lightning flashed as the lodge collapsed in a cloud of dust along with the ground.

“Fugyaa!?”

“W-wha……!!?”

Lightning poured down, ripping up the ground. The blast sent Yō and Calico into mid-air towards Underwood’s steep cliffs, nearly falling down the cliff where the huge waterfall leap off edge to the depths below. Righting her stance and with all traces of her drowsiness gone, Yō immediately started thinking to get a grasp of the situation.

(*That sound just now……! That’s the sound of the harp that was stolen yesterday……!?*)

Heartstrings that steal one’s consciousness. It was the [Golden Harp] that Yō took from her opponent. It took no time for her to realize that for some sort of reason, it was safe to assume that it was retaken by the enemy. Shaking off the Sandman, Yō immediately decided upon the course of action to meet up with the other [No Name] members. But the lightning showered down again and again, burning the roots of the trees and caused the ground to cave in.

Just like a cascade from a waterfall, the debris and shattered stones rained down after the initial explosions that launched them into the air. While skillfully maneuvering to dodge the rocks, Yō spotted a Kodama girl out of the corner of her eye.

“Kyaa!?”

“Look out!”

Summoning the wind and taking flight, she pulled the Kodama girl’s hand out from the caving ground. Dodging the burning roots of a falling tree, Yō was surprised by the girl she had just rescued.

“Are you alright……e,eh? Aren’t you the receptionist at the harvest festival?”

“Ye, Yeas. I’m Kirino. You are [No Name]’s……”

“Mhm. I’d like to have us introduce ourselves to each other, but let’s save that for later.”

“A-alright.”

The Kodama girl who called herself Kirino lowered her head in a bow as her flowered hair ornament rocked about. Yō hugged Kirino as she flew through the wreckage. Meanwhile, the rumbling of the thunder echoed throughout Underwood. To get as much information as possible, Yō raised her hearing to the maximum and tuned in to her surroundings. When she did, she heard a suspicious conversation from the watch tower.

“B-bad news! The Titans are also coming this way!!”

“What’d you say!?”

“Dammit, they’re coming out of the woodwork at a time like this……!!!”

No sooner had Yō heard of this before the bells started to ring to warn the people about the Titans’ attack. In the midst of the whirling pandemonium, there just had to be more bad news to top it off.

“The bell that signals an invasion……! It can’t be, even the Titans have appeared……!?”

Kirino let out a desperate cry as she trembled, holding onto Yō. But Yō’s problem laid elsewhere.

(……*The Titans, too?*)

She furrowed her brow in uneasiness and it was soon after that black sealed letters began to fall from the sky. Upon grabbing the black letter that brushed the tip of her nose, Yō suddenly turned pale,

“Ku……A sealed black Geass Roll letter!? It can’t be――――!?”

Touching down to the ground to drop Kirino off, Yō cut the seal with a nervous look.

<<GIFT GAME NAME: “SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING”>>

List of Participant(s):

***All living things engulfed by the Circle of Animals**

***#Upon the disappearance of the Circle of Animals, the game will be put on hold for an indefinite amount of time.**

Defeat Condition(s):

***None [Death of Participants will not be counted as being unable to clear the game]**

Prohibition(s):

***None.**

Punishment(s):

***A time limit will be imposed upon all the participants who have targeted and fought against the leader of the game.**

***The time limit will be a continuous time loop that occurs every ten days.**

***The choice of punishment will be chosen randomly from [Impaling], [Crucifixion], and [Immolation].**

***The only way to be freed of the punishment would be to clear the game or during a pause in the game.**

***#The death of the participant is not included within the conditions to be freed from the punishment and they will continue to suffer indefinitely.**

Winning conditions of the Host:

***None.**

Winning conditions of the Participant:

***Kill the leader of the game: [Draculea Demon Lord].**

***Kill the leader of the game: [Leticia Draculea].**

***Gather the broken fragments of the constellations, and bring the Circle of Animals to present to the throne.**

***Following the proper procedure and using the Circle of Animals that have been restored to the throne as a guide, strike the heart of the revolutionist who is bounded in chains.**

Oath: ***I hereby respect the above conditions in the name of pride, our banner, and the Host Master to uphold this Gift Game.***

“ ” Seal

Chapter 1

“Wha……What kind of game is this……!?”

The letter’s contents were pure nonsense. Yō had lived in the Little Garden for two months, but this was the first time she’d seen something like this. Worthy of note were the evil penalty conditions. It was completely different from the gift games Yō had seen up until now, foreign and dripping with malice.

(*A,And it says that Leticia is a game master……What’s going on――――!?*)

“It’s dangerous, get out of the way!!”

She had leapt back at Kirino’s cry. Just next to the two, two large objects like rocky masses fell. Yō looked at the two rocky masses, mystified by their momentum, which seemed a bit strange to have been caused by a cave-in. They stared on for a little while, but without any information, they didn’t know what to make of it.

We should get back to the surface, Yō thought as she turned her back, and then—

Massive tentacles shot out from the rocky mass, capturing Kirino.

“Kyaa!!”

“K-Kirino……!?”

Crap was the word that flashed in her mind but it was too late to regret. Looking at the rocky mass, it had grown not only ten massive tentacles, but four legs as well, and had started to move. In addition, the other rocky mass emitted intense heat from its entire body and became a 20 foot long salamander; its fiery breath scattered about, burning down a house.

“O,O,Ojou! The boulder turned into a monster!?”

“……A salamander and……a tentacle monster……!?”

The two monsters were not as large as the Titans, but their presence felt far more oppressive. In need of backup, Yō looked around for help, but she couldn't find anyone. Yō glanced at the residents of Underwood, who were running around avoiding the burned down roots of trees and the cave in, and with a look of determination, she dropped Calico from her arms.

"O,Ojou……!"

"……Calico. I'll take on those two, so go find Asuka."

"Y,ya got it, but takin' on those two monsters is……!"

"I'll be okay. I won't do anything crazy. When I save Kirino, I'll meet up with you. ――――Go!"

Just as she said this, Yō took flight in a whirlwind. Clenching his teeth, Calico turned his back and ran off. In the next moment, a flash pale streak of bluish-white lightning lit up the night sky of Underwood.

Part 2

Klunk!! The hard knock to the back shaft of her head due to the shockwave woke Kudou Asuka with a jerk. She, who had been sound asleep had awoken after hitting her head hard enough to see stars with tears that immediately welled in her eyes due to the pain.

"Ow……!? W,What the heck was that……!?"

"……You're sounding pretty laid back."

A calm, yet unamused voice spoke up from behind her. She furrowed her eyebrows in irritation as she turned around, and there stood a masked girl clad in pure white armor and dress skirt――――Faceless. Next to her was a mountain of rubble that looked like it had been from an explosion. If one looked around, all they would see would be a blazing sea of fire and pandemonium breaking loose. It was obvious that this was an emergency. Asuka wasn't a morning person, but even she couldn't stay sleepy in this situation. Asuka leapt to her feet and collected herself, then asked Faceless firmly.

"……What's happening? Did the Titans attack?"

"Who knows? What about going over to go take a look for yourself?"

Faceless replied coldly before turning on her heels. Even in this abnormal situation, she showed no signs of cooperating, to which Asuka responded to with a scornful look.

"Hey you, this is no time to be playing around――――"

――――The wind whistled sharply. As the wind stroked Asuka's cheek, there was the sound of a large creature collapsing behind her. Asuka turned around in confusion――――there lay a dragon with scales in a poisonous pattern, its neck severed in one blow. Klink, the sound of a sword being sheathed rang out behind her. Asuka then realized that the blow just now was Faceless' handiwork. At the same time, shivers ran down her spine.

Even though she was standing right in front of her, she didn't have a clue what she just did with her sword. If her target had been Asuka instead of the dragon, she

would've been dead before she noticed. Faceless gave a scornful look from under her mask in return, then broke out into a smile, laughing.

"It's not just me who needs to know their place. To not give a single word of gratitude after being saved three times, maybe you were raised poorly?"

"……Uu……!"

Her face became flushed by embarrassment with an almost explosive rage building up underneath, but by exerting her entire body and her pride, she somehow managed to keep it down. She didn't like her tone, but Faceless was right. If she talked back here, she'd have to deal with the shame over and over again. But she couldn't just obediently thank her, and as she was fretting, the voice of Jin Russel came from the cliff above her.

"Asuka-san! So you were okay!"

"Jin-kun……!"

Jin made his way down on the broken root of a tree. Next to him was Pest in a maid outfit.

"……Kasukabe-san and Leticia aren't with you?"

"T,That's right. We were staying at the same lodge, but……"

As he gave a vague reply, his shoulders drooped. She looked at the reserved Pest questioningly, but she did not return Asuka's glance, and silently looked at the night sky covered in storm clouds.

"……Jin. It would be best if we leave soon."

"Eh?"

"The contract is in effect, so it would be problematic if you died, and I do intend to protect you, but――――guarding you against that will prove difficult even for me."

Even with a composed and collected look, beads of cold sweat appeared on her face. Puzzled, everyone looked up at the sky and then.

"――――GYEEEEEEEEEYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaE
EEEEEEEEYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaa!!!"

――――What they saw was a scene from mythology. The massive dragon's roar that shook heaven and earth rang across Underwood. Its scream was impossible to understand in a human language, but it demonstrated its overwhelming presence. Hit by a roar that could've blown out their eardrums, they just stared up in amazement at the sky.

"J,Jin-kun……that just now was,"

"A pure blood dragon……! It can't be, why is the strongest class down here……!?"

The words he spat out were filled with fear. They'd seen all sorts of miracles after coming to the world of the Little Garden, but none of them could even compare with this extraordinary presence. Emerging from the thick storm clouds was the figure of a dragon whose size was on a scale of monolithic proportions. An icy chill ran down Asuka's spine, but she clenched her teeth shut and suppressed her trembling.

"……Jin-kun. Let's go look for everyone. Izayoi-kun aside, I'm worried about them."

"O,Of course."

Jin nodded in response. Finding a barely usable staircase on the rocky surface, everyone began to run for it, but Pest pulled them back by their sleeves.

“Jin, stay close to me.”

“P,Pest?”

“――――It’s coming!!”

Pest’s voice tensed up. The night sky followed up with a spark of lightning. The dragon that had emerged from the storm clouds let loose a roar; its scales scattering like buckshot all over Underwood. The scales then transformed into huge serpents, salamanders, and massive five-tailed scorpions. Against these summoned rabid beasts attempting to overrun Underwood, Asuka raised her Gift card in preparations for battle.

Part 3

――――Underwood Harvest Festival Main Quarters.

The [Draco Greif] Alliance had fallen into chaos. The messengers could not even deliver their messages all the way down to the servants in all the confusion, and the cooperation between communities was already close to non-existent. While the chaos spread, Sala Doltrake, the administrator seated directly beneath the Alliance’s flag, folded her arms and waited for a single piece of information. Depending on the nature of that information――――there is no doubt that this crisis will take a turn for the worse, she thought as she clenched her sweaty hand.

(*The southern floor master was defeated, and to take down their successor, a demon lord appeared. ……This feels like deja vu. It’s like what happened 3 years ago.*)

What kept bubbling back up in her heart was the memory of the alliance that Salamandra formed with another community long ago under the setting sun. It was the incident which became the impetus for causing Sala, the first successor, to run away from her home town. Looking back at the tragedy of her past, she sat in the administrator's chair, her arms still folded while she waited for the report. Soon after, a messenger barged in, gasping for breath.

"A,Administrator!! I have returned from the northern area!!"

"Well done. So, how are things in the north?"

"Y,yes. It is just as you said, a demon lord has also appeared near the north's floor master. Currently, a part of the Salamandra-Demon Princess alliance has been assaulted by the demon lord and has been rendered immobile!"

"……I see. It doesn't sound like they'll be able to send help."

Sala tensed the grip in her fist. Sala tried to convey her thanks, but in no time at all, the next messenger barged in.

"A,Administrator! It's bad news! We've been notified that a demon lord has also appeared near Shiroyasha of the east, and she is currently unreachable……!"

The northern messenger turned pale as if he were about to faint at the news of the messenger who barged in from the east. It didn't show on Sala's face, but her heart was in turmoil.

(……*The south has been destroyed, and demon lords have appeared in the north and east. What's more is that they seem to be targeting the floor masters and their successive candidates. This can't be a coincidence.*)

Strong-willed demon lords, seemingly under someone's control, simultaneously began an assault on the floor masters. If this is the truth, then this bad news could be called a bolt from the blue. A demon lord who once placed other demon lords under their control, wasn't all that uncommon. But that was only in cases like Zoroaster's demon lords or Grim Grimoire's means of using a creation summoning from scratch, or like the Heavenly Ones, gathering all of their affiliates under a single flag. A demon lord carrying their own flag would never mix their flag with someone else's. The very reason why a demon lord is considered to be a natural disaster is because of their lofty pride. So in following through with your conceit, without any predictions or preparation, there would be no other outcome than to be battered and broken by a raging storm. To be able to command these natural disasters as if they were working together, there was probably no worse nightmare than this.

(*As long as the floor masters are unable to move, the [Draco Greif] Alliance has no means of taking down the demon lord. But as the sponsor, it's my responsibility to at least get the participants to the outer gate……!!*)

Sala stood up from the administrator's chair, and spoke to the two messengers sharply.

"Thank you for your hard work. I would like you two to keep the situation in the north and east under wraps. Recklessly revealing this will cause the confusion to spread unnecessarily. You two will proceed to the four-legged chief and tell him to prepare as many wagons and chariots as he can to carry the participants to the outer gate. While we draw the attention of the Titan's army, the participants must be taken to a safe place!"

"Y,Yes, ma'am!"

The two messengers left the main quarters, sliding down the large trees' trunks. To prepare for her debut against the Titans, she equipped her usual sword and her favorite metal based gift on her wrists and ankles. This gift was also for raising the strength of her flames.

(*The exalted first's――――without the Dragon King of the Stars and Sea dragon's horn, I am just a hybrid, a distant relative of a dragon. Let's see how far I can get with the gift I have on me……!*)

With a tense look on her face, Sala continued her preparations. But, as if kicking away the tense atmosphere, Kuro Usagi came flying in through the window.

"Sala-sama! So you were alright!"

"Kuro Usagi-dono……wait, you're just in time. Gather your companions and prepare to go home. While we take on the Titans, the No Names should also take cover――――"

"There is no need! [SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING] will soon be paused for mediation due to a deliberation resolution! There is no response from the host, but I think we should be able to get at least a week of postponement!"

Sala took a deep breath, and the color returned to her face.

"I see……! With a judgemaster, the game can temporarily be put on hold!"

"Yes! So first, I would like to ask you to mop up the rabid beasts in Underwood!"

Kuro Usagi pricked up her ears as she answered. Sala had a clue on how to counterattack, but conversely, she let loose an anxious tone.

“That’s fine with me, but the Titans are almost here. What are we going to do about that?”

“About that――――”

“A,A,Administrator!! It’s an emergency!!”

Bursting in and trying to catch his breath was a beastman messenger that was different than the ones from before. Wondering what it was, Sala asked with a stern expression.

“What is it? Is something wrong?”

“T,That’s not it! Actually, in a sense, you could say that, but……!”

He was too shocked to put it in words. That would probably be the best way to express the messenger’s surprise. To Sala, the way the messenger panicked was what was shocking. Even if he had run into the Titans, he wouldn’t have been panicking this much. What’s more, the messenger’s face, while shocked for whatever reason, didn’t seem to show any hint of fear. If the strange expression on the messenger’s excellent face were put into words――――as though all wondrous things between heaven and earth had been gathered; like he had seen an extraordinarily strange and mysterious adventure’s cheat-level apparition――――put simply, that kind of complex expression painted his excellent face. While Sala pondered this, she rebuked the messenger who hadn’t fulfilled his duty.

“I don’t know what happened, but if it’s an emergency, then be quick about it! While we’re wasting time like this, the Titans will be――――”

Approaching, but she didn't get to finish her sentence. When she tried to say that last word, what happened right after was――――a Titan had been speared through the window.

"……Hah……!?"

Crash!!! The window ruptured magnificently. Then the large tree rocked and shook violently. Sala suddenly became speechless. The Titan warrior, covered from head to toe in dust and rubble, did not just come flying in, but was hit with a force strong enough to break its armor and passed out.

"Wha……What happened,"

She didn't know what had happened. It showed on Sala's face. Next to her, Kuro Usagi, with an unusually uncomfortable expression, gave her a timely explanation.

"W,Well……This Titan was probably thrown over here by one of our companions……"

"……Thrown?"

Sala questioned on reflex. But Kuro Usagi didn't raise her voice to correct her. While Sala became dubious about this, she went out through the collapsed wall and looked down upon the battlefield where the Titans and the [Draco Greif] Alliance were fighting. Underwood encompasses a length of 500 meters with a massive water tree famed for its size. From the mountainside where the harvest festival's main quarters was located, she could see the entire battlefield. There, Sala was shocked for a second time. The Draco Greif's front lines, which should have been pushed back to the nearby parts of the city within a few minutes――――had rallied back, securing a path all the way to the outer gate. And, leading them at the front, was a single boy.

"It can't be……that boy threw a Titan all the way here?!"

How is that possible!!? Sala's voice rasped. For her, who had lived 200 years, she knew the limits of the human body well. Even if he had been approved divinity by a holy spirit, it was impossible for him to have such herculean strength. Sala was confused, but the messenger that was standing by near her, to support Kuro Usagi's words, added his own.

"Administrator. Usagi-dono here isn't lying. And if I might add, the Titans' invasion was, by that boy alone……ah, no……that is, to be specific! That boy alone is attempting to destroy the Titans by force!!"

"……Wha,"

Sala stared at the messenger's menacing expression with her mouth half-open, shocked. She came back to her senses when the second Titan was speared.

Part 4

————Underwood Southeast Plains.

Gry, who was fighting on the front lines, froze as he gazed at the boy. Even though he was prepared to die in this fight beforehand, now he stood still, as if his soul was leaving him. Everyone in the [Draco Greif] Alliance who should have had the same tragic resolve, now stopped moving, holding their breath as they looked upon the front lines. The front lines were filled with a great army led by the Titans and an inexhaustible herd of newborn rabid beasts. In the sky was the massive dragon. On the ground were rabid beasts and Titans.

Underwood's landscape was the expression of a cool, spectacular water display, but right now, those days were coming to an end with the destructive force of monsters. The harvest festival held for Underwood's restoration was trampled down by monsters and extinguished. In this situation, there were only two kinds of people who wouldn't feel desperate in all of Little Garden. They would either have to be carefree, bold with nerves of steel, or――――a divine warrior that does not fear even a god of war.

"……Hmm? I heard about the Celt's Titans, so I figured they'd be a bunch of gods. It seems I'll have to change my train of thought. So basically, you're all nothing more than humans turned Titan, a basic framework of phantom beasts. ……But falling into this predicament after fighting a kid like me, wouldn't your ancestors be weeping right about now?"

He patted his school uniform over the shoulder in dissatisfaction as he glanced at the Titan troops. In response to his every movement, not just the Titans, but his allies too trembled and retreated. At his feet were several hundred defeated Titans and scattered fragments of destroyed armor. The scraps of flesh lying around were from the rabid beasts summoned by the massive dragon. There was probably no good explanation for this unknown helper. Even Gry, who knew his face, stood dumbfounded and marveled at his nonsensical abilities.

"There's someone that powerful……hiding within the No Name community……..!?"

Gry dared to, in a different meaning, call them No Names. In this Little Garden of gods, a person this powerful, yet without any of the glory, which could only be blamed on irrationality, he dared to say it with this in mind. The Titans, the rabid

beasts, the despair that reigned over Draco Greif's members, were all crushed by this boy――――Sakamaki Izayoi, with an insolent light in his eye, spit on the Titans.

"I'll only say this once. Get the hell out of here right now, you flunkies. I was really looking forward to this harvest festival. It's enough that I already have to go deal with that flying lizard, so don't go causing more problems for me." Izayoi clicked his tongue. At his arrogant tone, time had started moving once again on the battlefield. The Titan troops, taking Izayoi's words as taunts, let out a battle cry, and once again set their eyes on attacking Underwood.

"UOOOOOOOOOOooooooo――――!!!"

The Titan warriors cut through the vanguard. They didn't seem to be armed. They probably thought blades would be useless, so they came with grapples. They tried to at least restrict his movements by grappling him, but with overwhelming speed, Izayoi slipped through. Izayoi proceeded to jump off the backs of the Titans' heads as stepping stones. The Titans who were stepped on were propelled face first into the ground. But it was a mistake to dance through the air. As long as he was human, it was fact that he couldn't fly. The giants decided that this was their chance to win, so they threw chains at once from all directions and captured Izayoi.

"UOOOOOOOOOOooooooo――――!!!"

Twice, thrice, quadruple, quintuple the amount of chains piled. There, the Titans added their massive strength, aiming to compact the chains, which creaked loudly. To finish off Izayoi, who was bound by several layers of chains, the Titans standing by in the back erected a tesla coil. Although it was nowhere near as powerful as the lightning that the dragon shoots, it was a light bulb that could release enough heat to melt iron. If they shot that, it was obvious that the Titans wouldn't be left unscathed

either. But the Titans who were holding the chains showed no intent to let up. The ten Titans that were holding Izayoi captive――――were prepared to throw their lives away as they gripped the chains.

“T,This is bad!!”

Gry let out an impatient voice. He could probably see the Titans’ death wishes in the their eyes. Putting strength into his limbs, he took off to help. But it was too late. The Titan who erected the tesla coil glanced at his fellow Titans and nodded in reply to their resolve. As the roar of the thunder drew near, carrying the life and pride of the Titans――――

“――――Hah, I get it. So your pride was still intact, flunkies――――!!!”

――――He was swept away by an attack that shook the stars. The chains that the Titans used to bind Izayoi shattered to pieces, and their right hands dissolved in the lightning. The Titans had been equipped with masks, but their disbelief could be seen through them. As phantom beasts of humanity, and as fellow human beings, it is because of this that they could feel it in their bones how nonsensically unusual this human was. In contrast, Izayoi’s eyes began to set ablaze with joy.

“Man, I guess it was rude to call you flunkies. My bad. ――――Those who were prepared to die, and those who were prepared to kill them. After seeing that, I can’t really take you guys lightly. But conversely, I’d have to ask you guys why you’re all doing something so criminal……”

“――――……o,OOOOOOOOOOoooooooo――――!!!”

As if to shake off Izayoi’s question, the Titans raised a battle cry and rushed in. If the enemy was going to rush in, then he’d have to push them back. Izayoi kept this

faint suspicion inside his heart while he leaped into a Titan's chest and punched through his armor, sending him flying. The Titan's chain had shattered to pieces, and his momentum carried him all the way to the back line unabated, flying another few hundred meters entangled with other Titans.

After confirming that they were down for the count, Izayoi then turned to his allies, the Draco Greif Alliance, and fearlessly questioned them as well.

"By the way, I have some questions about our allies here as well, but……you guys in the Draco Greif Alliance, how long are you going to pretend to be in despair?"

"W,What……!?"

A buzz spread along the several phantom beasts, Gry included. There were those who felt insulted, and others who felt provoked by Izayoi's words. All sorts of reactions ran about. Izayoi didn't understand what they were saying, but after looking at their reactions, he figured it was possible to communicate with them, so he agitated them with a theatrical complaint.

"As you can see, the enemy was prepared to give up 10 of their own to kill me. That mindset is indeed, unmistakably that of a formidable opponent. I have to say, that was gutsy. ……After seeing that mortal enemy's mindset, the Draco Greif Alliance, which upholds the symbol of courage, can't possibly be sniveling like wimps."

"……Nu……!"

Izayoi snorted as he felt like he struck a nerve. The alliance's members bared their fangs, growling, but didn't say a word. It was as he'd said, the Gryphon's banner

was typically engraved with bravery and honor. If this is a community with kingship, then it could be used as a display of sovereignty as well.

Elements of eagles, kings of the sky, and lions, kings of the earth, were present in the phantom beasts. By questioning the true meaning behind their banner, Izayoi had agitated the alliance members. His manner of speaking was indeed extremely irritating, but his word had some truth to it, which was in bad taste. They wanted to respond but couldn't, as murmurs spread among the herd. Izayoi briefly examined their reactions, but replacing the smirk on his face with a serious expression,

"……Face the facts already. This grand harvest festival is supposed to have Underwood's restoration riding on it. Those guys then committed acts of vandalism against this festival, throwing dirt on your deepest wish. Scarring your companions and the land, and raised arms against your pride and your flag. After taking this amount of humiliation, within the hearts of the members of Draco Greif――――shouldn't be despair, but justified anger."

This time, he spoke in half serious contempt. That was also how Izayoi really felt. Even though the [Draco Greif] Alliance had their pride trampled upon, spit on, and wounded……in front of their mortal enemy, they couldn't let their anger erupt. That was frustrating, and couldn't be left that way.

"If you're not going to move anymore after this, then that's fine too. That must be the [Draco Greif] Alliance's secret to success. ――――But don't forget. If you're not going to stand up against your mortal enemy, the fact that you've hidden behind the backs of lowly [No Names] to survive will be something for even the future generations to laugh at."

"……Tch……you've gone too far, brat……!"

"They've got a bit of bite to them, but in the end, they're just seedy looking monkeys who have no claws or fangs!"

"Yeah! He may have crushed 20 Titans with his fist, but we've speared twice as many with our horns! We're not inferior to them at all!"

Receiving Izayoi's ferocious instigation, a cry of fighting spirit and reproach rang out from the phantom beasts. No matter the size of his power, Izayoi was inexperienced. Not to mention, being talked down by a human kid that much, even they'd get mad. The tolerant inhabitants of the south also had their limits.

The [Draco Greif] Alliance was roused by their anger towards Izayoi. But only Gry, who had already lost his rider, was in a different situation. Losing his partner who accompanied him for many years, it was for this very reason that Izayoi's words carved very deeply into his heart.

(*……My homeland was scarred, regardless of losing my rider, in this predicament…….even if that boy laughs at me, it can't be helped.*)

Gry raised his eagle head and looked at his lion body's back. The partner he had carried there for many years was no longer here. In his everyday battles, his rider was struck by a falling arrow and fell, never to be seen again.

He'd gone numb battling with bad news happening one after the other, but anger and a sense of loss welled up deep within his gut.

(*Fighting an uphill battle everyday, and my lack of aspiration up until now. There's no way this abomination should be of one of the tribes of beast kings and the figure of the community……!!!*)

————The gryphon, of all tribes, had succumbed to fear towards the enemy instead of sadness towards the loss of his companions. Wrapped in anger towards his own humility, Gry, with all of his might, trembled as he roared like an animal and rushed towards the Titans.

“OOOOOOOOOOOOooooo!!!”

In the human language, it probably sounded like any other animal’s cry. But that roar was unmistakably that of an enraged warrior. Letting out a battle cry, Gry, without any cheap tricks up his sleeve, charged in, kicking up swirls of tornado-like whirlwinds which shredded the Titans’ armor and sent them flying. Izayoi praised his gallant figure in admiration.

“Hah, as expected of the king of beasts! Looks like this’ll be quite the show……!”

The gryphon had rushed in past Izayoi at supersonic speeds. His figure roused the other phantom beasts to follow after, roaring, and with great fighting spirit, they rained down on the Titans. Like this, they could probably fight the Titans on equal footing. Their morale had rebounded, and their confusion had been quelled as well. At this rate, Izayoi would probably no longer have to deal with the Titans.

(*With this, there should be no more problems with the Draco Greif Alliance’s morale for the rest of the game. Now if we could make our standings clear during the deliberation resolution, maybe we can grab the initiative.*)

In the middle of the increasingly intense war between the phantom beasts and the Titans, Izayoi casually looked up at the sky. Even now, inside the thunder clouds, the massive dragon was squirming around. When this game began, Izayoi

understood that he had a role to fulfill. What could take down that massive dragon lurking in the thunder clouds was probably――――the gift that resided within him.

Part 5

――――Underwood Harvest Festival Main Quarters.

Sala's mouth hung open, taking in the situation. If she was normally known for her resolute behavior, then it wouldn't take much time to realize that this was a rare case. As if to prove that fact, the beastmen who arrived as messengers were also looking troubled as they waited quietly in the back.

"……Kuro Usagi-dono."

"Yes, what is it."

Sala glanced at the battlefield from the collapsed wall.

"……What is that."

With an extremely rude choice of words, she pointed at Izayoi. Kuro Usagi smiled slightly bitterly as she scratched the back of her ear.

"Well, I'll explain about him later on――――it's almost time for the deliberation resolution to be received. I will let you know, so please take command and join in the mission to mop up the remaining rabid beasts within the city."

"Y,Yes. Understood."

Sala lightly tapped her forehead with her fist, and switched gears. Kuro Usagi took out her monochrome colored gift card, Vajra's Replica. Receiving power from the

Little Garden, Kuro Usagi's hair gave off a pale light, turning it scarlet, eventually beginning to burn brightly like flames. As her bunny ears swung about unsteadily, Kuro Usagi declared in a voice that could reach throughout the entire area of Underwood.

"The judgemaster's invocation has been accepted! As of now, [SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING] is temporarily put on hold, and we will be holding a deliberation resolution! Players and hosts, please stop the fighting and promptly begin preparations for the negotiations table! I repeat-"

"————GYEEEEEEEEEEYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaEEEEEEEEEYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaa!!!"

Eh? Kuro Usagi couldn't believe what she just heard. While she was making a declaration about the deliberation resolution, the massive dragon scattered thunder clouds passing just 100 meters above Underwood, and stirred up gusts of wind.

"What!?"

Izayoi exclaimed from the unexpected gusts of wind and was entwined with the windstorm. And it wasn't just Izayoi. Also fighting in Underwood, Asuka, Jin, Pest, the Titans, the rabid beasts, all kinds of people were indiscriminately blown into the sky. Sala froze up as she gazed at this act of tyranny.

"The city……the battlefield, everything's flying into the sky……!"

"Sala-sama, look out!!"

Kuro Usagi grabbed Sala's hand as she was almost sucked into the windstorm. Sala was only up in the air for a few moments, but her blood froze as she watched several of her companions being blown up into the sky without any way to resist.

This is the strongest class――――the fact that it was a pure blood dragon made her shudder, but that wasn't what was truly terrifying. It was that this level of wind wasn't even a special technique for this dragon. To the dragon, what happened just now――――was just him moving. That really was all that happened.

As long as the deliberation resolution has been accepted, it was obvious that the enemy wouldn't move with the intent to harm. It is this power to shake the heavens and earth just by soaring through the sky, that in this Little Garden of gods, they are referred to as 'natural disasters'. With its massive body that surpassed human knowledge, the city, the battlefield, the beastmen, the spirits, the phantom beasts, the rabid beasts, the Titans, the humans, everything was equally just rabble to it, sneering as it drew everything towards the sky.

"This can't be……how is this possible……!?"

Sala clung to the large tree's creaking trunk, and looked up at the sky in fear of the massive dragon's figure as it returned to the heavens. The falling rubble and wreckage came into view. The screams of falling friends and Titans. Falling like trash.

"T,This is bad! Let's go save them, Sala-sama!"

"……"

"Sala-sama!!!"

Kuro Usagi grabbed her hand, snapping her out of it as she raised her head.

"……Sorry. We must make haste, Kuro Usagi-dono!"

She slapped her cheeks and let out a shout. Releasing wings of flame, Sala and Kuro Usagi went to rescue their falling companions.

Interlude 1

Part 1

---Above [Underwood]. The Ancient Vampire Citadel

The air in the ancient city was filled with a sense of emptiness and dust particles.

Although the rock structures were obviously abandoned for a long time, they did not seem to be weathered away and that is probably due to the Kekkai that barricades the Citadel from the outside world.

And happening at another side of the Game stage unbeknownst to most, during the time of the ceasefire...

Along the long cloister that stretched from the castle doors to the throne room.

A young girl's lively voice was echoing in the Ancient Vampire Palace which was supposed to be devoid of all presence.

"Your Highness---! Where did you go---?!"

A black haired girl was breaking her steps every now and then to search around her as she climbed the stairs of the cloister.

Dressed in a sleeveless black one piece dress, a short jacket was also tied to her waist. At first glance, she would just appear to be a cute lass, but hanging down from the leather belt along her waist, were several daggers that were exuding an ominous feeling around them.

"Your Highness---! Oji-san---! The Game has entered a state of ceasefire, what do we do next---!"

Climbing up to the top of the stairs that were located at the start of the cloister and onto the platform of the turning point, she gave a shout with all the air in her lungs.

“YOUR HIGHNESS---! HIGHNESS HIGHNESS HIGHNESS HIGHNESS HIGH---NESS!”

Although the childlike voice that sounded as crisp as the sound of a bell’s tinkle continued to echo around the cloister, the person she was looking for had yet to respond.

The girl tossed her long glossy black hair as she pouted her little lips seeming to be in a small tantrum as she puffed her cheeks as well.

At that moment, a wry giggle seemed to escape from the direction of the throne room.

“Rin, his Highness has already left to scout the situation outside the Citadel not long ago.”

Following the cloister that continued to stretch to the heart of the palace, one could see a woman who stood in the throne room bathing in the moonlight while having her face covered by the hood of her long robes and cradled in her hands was the [Golden Harp].

The girl who was addressed by the name of Rin turned back to look at the robed woman as she intertwined her fingers behind her back.

“Oh that’s how it is~Then it’s only me and Aura doing the house-sitting?”

“That’s right……But though it may be so, we are still not the Host of the game and do not have to abide by the oath to have a ceasefire. Well, the order to lead the Titan

tribe into battle should come soon I think, so let's just calmly rest and conserve our energies for now."

The woman dressed in the long robes---addressed as Aura, was daintily covering her mouth as she continued to giggle. Rin nodded her head with enthusiasm as she crossed the large doorway that led to the throne room.

The semi-spherical ceiling was made using a crystal that allowed moonlight filter in. And the throne stood at the heart of this room.

And sitting at this very throne was the [Host] of this Game--- Leticia Draculea.

"Hey, Aura. How's the condition of this blonde?"

"Still unconscious and perhaps she might stay that way for the whole duration of the game." Aura replied while shrugging her shoulders.

With the sound of feet coming into contact with the ground, Rin had rushed off to the throne and bent over Leticia who was sitting upright on the throne though she had lost her consciousness.

"Come to think about it, this blonde……sure is cute. It sure is quite unbelievable that such a cute girl is actually a Demon Lord~"

Rin's eyes sparkled with curiosity as she stared at Leticia.

Leticia was wearing a different set of clothes. A black formal dress that was different from the maid outfit she wore when she was captured. With both her wrists and ankles shackled by chains to the throne, rather than saying that she's a demon lord, it would appear that she was more of a prisoner.

Rin slowly reached her hand towards the beautiful golden hair that was giving of a luster in the moonlight.

But at this moment, a voice from behind stopped her short.

“-- old it. Rin. That Demon Lord is something like a bait. Touching her will make you targeted too.”

Rin’s fingertip twitched but immediately stopped.

Carrying a bit of the child-like qualities in the voice, it must have come from the youth.

Rin immediately turned around like the natural reflex of a kitten sensing its owner's return.

"Your Highness ! And Occhan !"

"Stop the ruckus, Rin. You needn't be that loud for me to hear you."

Following her shout came the reply of a husky voice that seemed to come from an old person who stood in the shadows of the cloister. Due to the cloister's shadow being cast over the features, it made it difficult to see the facial feature or even to make out the gender of the person and the only thing identifiable was that the person was considerably old.

The youth addressed as his Highness, with his shoes clacking on the ground, strode into the throne room to stop before Aura and Rin.

Looking about the age of ten years old with the allowance of one or two years on that number, the regal airs that were exuded from him matched the title they addressed him by: 'His Highness'. However, the formal dress seemed to be worn on his body without much care about tidiness.

From his dress style and that unique trait of his white hair sticking up on both sides of his head, one could see the childish side to him.

While at the same time, the golden irises that gave off a glow of its own seemed to exude a sense of prudence that seemed to be a mismatch with his appeared age.

The youth who was addressed as ‘His Highness’ took a glance at the trio in turn to confirm the current situation.

“Aura, Rin. Have you heard of the game coming to a cease-fire?”

“Of course.”

“Then that makes things simpler. I want you two to take this opportunity to launch an attack on [Underwood] with the Titan tribes, so play it by ear. When the main force of the enemy is broken, find a chance to inform me. Any questions?”

“Me!”

Rin exaggeratedly raised her hand with her fingers straightened to emphasize her point.

Although it was his question that led to this response, His Highness seemed to be displeased as he furrowed his brows.

“……Rin. I don’t see how my brief on the battle operation has anything confusing about it.”

“Nn! I just wanted to confirm something. The battle operation that you just mentioned is along the grounds of [Breaking the main force of the enemy’s participants] right? If the participants did not disperse but fled together, then what do we do?”

His Highness gave a *Uu~* sound as he was momentarily stumped. Rin’s question had unexpectedly hit the mark and that gave him a surprise.

His Highness reflected upon his own mistake for having been unclear about his orders before continuing:

"Sorry about that, for it is my mistake for not stating it clearly enough. If there are participants who escape, let them be. Our main motive here is to disrupt the ascension of a new [Floor Master]. And hence it will be fine to just destroy [Underwood]."

"Oh I see! Then, what if the participants organize themselves to take on the Titans together?"

"Impossible."

His Highness immediately replied. That unexpectedly quick reply caused Rin to blink her eyes for a few times.

But seeing how her master had answered with such certainty in his voice, Rin decided to give her own lively reply:

"Nn. Since Your Highness says so, I will just take you up on that."

"Nn. Just believe in me."

"But, I say… Why can't I touch this blond haired girl?"

Rin pointed at Leticia while pouting in dissatisfaction. That expression of hers was just like a kitten that has its toy cruelly taken away from her.

His Highness shook his head disapprovingly and his white hair, which could be said to be his unique trait, had also swung with the movement of his head.

"Enough. Just don't touch it and all will be fine. Haven't you heard of the idiom of 'Curiosity killed the cat' before?"

"……Really? What a pity." Rin chewed her finger as her shoulders drooped in disappointment.

Aura who stood to one side as she watched the whole banter between the two youths play out before her was suppressing her laughter as she opened her mouth to bring the conversation back to the main topic.

“Well then. Your Highness, Rin and I shall be going down to ground level. As for this Citadel, we will be leaving it to you and him---Graiya. Is that okay?”

“Nn. Gra-Ojichan , you should reply too.”

Under His Highness’s urging, Aura turned her gaze to the cloisters. And sounding from the shadows was a reply that was completely different from the husky voice of an elderly that had answered earlier. Sounding more of a low growl of a wild beast.

“I understand……But Your Highness, there’s something that bothers me.”

“What is it?”

“Regarding the [No Name]s that have defeated the [Black Death Demon Lord]……I heard rumors that they have the complete form of the [Genome Tree].”

Hearing that piece of news, the eyes of His Highness grew as round as saucers and his surprise caused him to be silent for a moment.

“……Is that source reliable?”

“It’s just a rumor I heard. But if it is the truth, then that will become quite a situation to reckon with.”

“So how do you intent to deal with that?” he added.

Hmm~ His Highness went into deep thought as he placed his hand to the corner of his mouth to think for a while before replying:

"……No. Let's not do anything about that for now. Even if that is indeed the real thing, the change of hands should only be in the recent years and it will not pose a significant threat for now. Moreover, the information is still unconfirmed."

"Yes."

"But in the case when the holder of [Genome Tree] appears before you, please give it your all to get it into your hands. In the worst case scenario, even if it means giving up on the battle plans, we must obtain it for ourselves."

"Oh my. Is that really going to go well?"

"It's okay. [Genome Tree] is definitely as valuable as that. In comparison to its value, one or two [Underwood]s wouldn't even be able to match up to it. We must obtain it even if you have to kill the current holder." His Highness gave the announcement with much resolve in his voice.

Aura's mouth twitched into a stunning smile as she nodded her head.

"Yes sir. I'd also planned to try out the power of my little war trophy……Hehe, looks like I can have an experiment at this time too."

"War trophy?"

Rin looked at Aura curiously as she took out a cyan colored Gift card to display the Gift that she had stolen from [Underwood].

"---[The Death Eye of Balor]. It's said that this is the strongest mystical eye that holds the power to release a wave of death and is of an inheritance to the Titan race. So, let me use it to destroy [Underwood] for you."

Part 2

---[Underwood Underground City] Emergency Medical Treatment Point.

Due to the fact that this was a hastily assembled medical treatment point, the injured were tightly packed into the small and narrow place.

With sixty percent of the residential buildings burnt, they could only set the injured to lie side by side.

Fortunately, the works to put out the fire had been completed quickly. All thanks to the huge Water Tree and the river that flowed outside the city, it made the process of putting out fires progress smoothly without a hitch.

But what made everyone seem to rejoice should be the fact that all the Demonic Beasts, that were the clones of the huge Dragon's body, had also completely disappeared.

The violent winds that were whipped up by the huge dragon had swept all of the huge Demonic Beasts up and back into its body. Since the game had entered the stage of Trial Jurisdiction, the huge dragon was also required to retrieve its clones.

But if one looked at it in another perspective---Just a mere act of the huge dragon retrieving its clones had already caused the Titan tribes and [Underwood] to be almost wiped out. The huge dragon just had that much power in it.

Even in Little Garden, the world of gods, it was still seen and revered as the [Strongest Class] of all the species.

As befitting of the title of a Demon Lord, just by the writhing of its body, it already held the power to completely destroy the spirits of the participants.

In the meantime, the [No Name]s had all gathered at the Medical Treatment Point to ascertain each other's conditions.

After entering the state of Trial Jurisdiction for fifteen minutes or so, Izayoi, Kuro Usagi, Asuka and the others had managed to successfully meet up……However, even after much hunting around, the Kasukabe Yō and Leticia were still missing.

"……I guess this is it. Even after searching for so long and we still didn't find them, I guess it would be best to assume that Kasukabe, as similar to Leticia, should have been caught up in some abnormal circumstances."

"But……But Kasukabe-san can fly in the skies. I don't think she would be in trouble……"

"Ojou-sama, that just happens to be the opposite. Kasukabe can fly in the skies, her five senses are acute as well but she is unable to meet up with us. This can only mean that there is some important reason."

Izayoi used a serious tone, which was quite rare from him, to make his clarification known. Asuka sucked in her breath to try to hide her worry and surprise, but it was still evident on her face.

"Come to think about it, was it true that Leticia got captured?" Turning to face Izayoi once more, she seemed to want a reconfirmation of the situation.

"Nn. And this Game is a Gift Game hosted by Leticia---[Draculea Demon Lord]."

Izayoi took out a black Geass Roll from his school uniform---[SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING], and read out its contents.

After hearing the contents, Asuka shook her head with a complicated expression that was difficult to be placed into words.

"……The contents sure are a mess."

"Well, that's not really the case for at least, the game is structured quite well. After that, we will just have to ask Kuro Usagi to confirm a few things……"

"Izayoi-san! Asuka-san! I've news on Yō-san's whereabouts!"

"Really?"

"YES……but the situation seems to be bad."

A pained and brooding expression seem to surface on Kuro Usagi's face.

In her arms, she was carrying a Calico Cat who was unconscious with many scrapes on his body. Although Izayoi and Asuka didn't know what could have happened, they were still able to deduce the severity of the situation from Kuro Usagi's expression and Calico Cat's condition.

Shifting their gazes back to Kuro Usagi, Izayoi asked the appropriate and direct question:

"……What's with Kasukabe?"

Kuro Usagi's expression had grown sombre and her rabbit ears drooped as she replied:

"According to eye-witnesses,..... Yō-san wanting to save the child was ensnared by the Demonic Beast's grasp……"

"Chased the Demonic Beast and the child up into the skies when they were retrieved by the main body."

Kuro Usagi and Jin's report caused Izayoi and Asuka to draw their breaths in surprise.

The few of them then lifted their heads to the skies. Their sights were trained upon the citadel which appeared together with the huge dragon hovered in the far off skies.

"You mean……Kasukabe-san had gone into that Citadel alone?"

"……yes."

Asuka's face turned pale whereas Izayoi who stood beside her did not hide his frustration and worry as he gave a very audible click of his tongue.

No matter how strong his Gift was---[Flight] was something that he couldn't do.

"……Kuro Usagi, if that is true, then the people who were swept by the winds should be more than just Kasukabe right? So what are the other Communities planning to do?"

"About that, they will be arranging for a discussion to be held with the [Draco Greif] Alliance shortly. According to the news Kuro Usagi gathered from her ears, it would seem that there's also an important figure of the [Draco Greif] Alliance who is still currently unaccounted for. If things go well, Kuro Usagi guesses that they may form the rescue team by tomorrow."

"……Oh? An important figure in the association huh…No wonder their actions are that fast."

Izayoi muttered softly but did not ask further.

Kasukabe Yō and Leticia. Having lost their only two comrades who could fly, the group of [No Name]s could only stare at the Ancient Citadel floating in the skies with frustration and anxiety.

Part 3

---Above [Underwood]. Ancient Vampire Citadel, outer walls.

There was almost nowhere left to go now. Kasukabe Yō leaned against the old and beaten outer walls of the Citadel that were badly weathered as she tried to take a few deep breaths to readjust her breathing. However, just as she was trying to catch her breath, there came a sound of something crawling across the rubble on the Outer walls that was gradually approaching in their direction.

“Uu…It’s that monster again……”

Yō immediately shied away as she felt the presence of the enemy approaching.

A black shadow that was producing a disgusting sound of slick wet matter traveling across the rubble was gradually approaching. The fellow that seemed to be patrolling the Out skirts of the Citadel was a deep red and black monster that seemed to be the amalgamation of clots of blood and moss.

This humanoid looking monster moved quickly but its body’s defense was very weak. The threat from a single monster was nothing to be fearful about.

However, if it were to be a few hundred together, the situation would be very much different.

Moreover, who she was protecting behind her back wasn’t only Kirino.

But there were a dozen or so wounded participants and children who had been caught by the Demonic Beasts and some of them were behind her now.

“Where can we hide for a while?!”

“Here. Here will do!”

The people hurriedly rushed to hide behind the rubble that Kirino had pointed to, which was just beside the Outer walls. Pushing aside the debris that were scattered around, Yō led the children to hide in a crevice that led to a crater beneath the rubble before sitting at the opening to hide everyone behind her.

Yō finally found the time to catch her breath and she looked back at the residents of [Underwood] behind her.

“……Everyone alright back there?”

“Ah…Nn.”

“Yep. We are still alive all thanks to your efforts, lass.”

Kirino and an elder Beastman expressed their thanks.

Just like Kirino, all of them had been brought here when the huge dragon was retrieving its clones and they just happened to be in the grasp of the Demonic Beasts when it occurred. But they were dumped in the Out skirts of the Ancient Citadel. Originally, losing their lives in this kind of situation wouldn’t be too surprising but due to the Trial Jurisdiction in play, the Host would not be able to interfere with the participants. And hence, they were safely dropped off.

Besides Yō herself, the number of people who had successfully met up was a total of seven. And amongst them, six were children much younger than Yō.

But currently, they were now being pressured by the patrolling enemies outside of the Citadel walls and were cornered.

[……What a predicament. If only it were Kirino alone, I could still carry her and run. But with this many, it would surely exceed the weight limit I can carry. Even if I tried my best, three would still be my limit.]

She had guessed that there would be others brought here as well.

But she did not expect that there would be enemies lurking at the outskirts who would attack them.

[We are currently in the midst of Trial Jurisdiction and those reddish black monsters still dare to attack us. In other words, they are not in the influence of the Host……Could it be that these monsters are just inhabiting this area and are not monsters that are part of the game?]

Perspiration beaded her forehead and the sunlight reflected off them made them look like crystals that fell to the ground while Yō rapidly organized her thoughts.

[I should confirm the current situation first.] Yō peered from the slit in the structure where they were hiding to look at the surrounding structures.

[……Nope. That would seem strange as well. First off, this Citadel should originally be the Community grounds of the Vampires or something similar. There shouldn't be monsters that look like the amalgamation of moss and plant litter that loiter around the Citadel right?]

In addition, this was a place that was almost a few thousand meters above ground in the skies. If it were living here originally, that would be a different matter but for

them to propagate in such large numbers in a ruined castle keep, that just didn't seem to be a plausible explanation.

Yō was sorting through all the various possibilities about the enemy's origin.

Just then, she heard the Elder Beastman who had messy furred cat ears mutter behind her:

"That kind of plant……is probably a parasitic type."

"……Nekomimi Oji chan, you know something about it?"

"Yep, it shouldn't be wrong. It would seem that the moss like portion is the spores. They should be a kind of fungi that use other biological matter or carcasses as its seedbed to grow."

"Oh? Just like tōchūkasō ?"

"Nn. You're right. Because of how similar it is, it has been named as [tōjūkasō]. These strange plants had also appeared in [Underwood] in the past."

"Is it..." Yō gave a short reply.

Since it's a type of fungi, then its spores could have flown to this area. And since it could leech off a host as a parasite, it could also have been brought over by birds.

"Well, that line of thought would make the pieces fit…… Thank you, Ojichan."

"It's nothing. This small thing is nothing compared to the debt I owe you for saving my life. Anyways, don't call me Ojichan. My name is Garol Gundark of [Six Scars]."

Garol Gundark gave a laugh and his messy furred cat ears also moved with his laugh.

Kirino who was listening from the side started to blink a few times upon hearing the name.

“[Six Scars]’s Garol…… Could… Could you be the leader of [Six Scars], Garol-dono!”

“……You know each other?”

“No, it’s not the matter of knowing each other or not. When talking about [Bakeneko Garol] , it can only be the one who was part of the founding members of the [Draco Greif] Alliance! And he’s a famous character who had fought alongside Draco Greif to defend the peace in the South Side!”

“OiOi, how long ago was that? It’s all in the past already. I’m currently just an insignificant Sentry of the Alliance’s Gold safe box.” Garol-dono tried to be humble but he was still laughing heartily.

According to Sala, [Six Scars] were a Community within the Alliance that was focused on commerce. And that should be the reason behind him saying that he’s a sentry for the safe box as well.

Yō stared at Garol’s cheerful face and nekomimi for a while before blurting out softly:

“Bakeneko and sentry who guards the safe box……ManekiNeko?”

“Eh……?!”

“AhHahahaha! Lass, you sure are an interesting one! If an old cat like me can even reach that standard of being able to bring in an endless flow of customers, I would really be rich!”

Interlude 1

Kirino was flustered but Garol had only slapped his knee as he laughed uncontrollably.

Perhaps he had laughed too hard for he had soon bent over clutching his injury and muttering “Ouch.”.

“……Oh right. I’ve not asked your names, young lasses.”

“I…I’m Kirino of [Underwood].”

“Kasukabe Yō, at your service, Garol-dono.”

Kirino and Yō gave a nod of respect to him as they gave their names.

Hearing the introduction of their names, the muscle below Garol’s eye began to twitch violently.

“---Did you say Kasukabe?”

“Nn……Is something the matter?”

“Ah… no, nothing. Anyways, coming back to topic, what should we do in this current situation? Sadly, my leg has been injured and besides playing some tricks, there’s nothing more I can do.”

“Nn……That really is a pity.”

“Yea……using trickery to scare the plants shouldn’t be of much use right……”

Seeing how the two of them were joking around, Kirino had also joined in with a comeback albeit feeling troubled.

But the current situation was grim. The reason for Yō and Garol’s little banter should have been to put the other children at ease and not have additional tension.

[But come to think of it, the tōjūkasō is able to live on corpses……Then could the host of those fungi be---?]

Just when Yō was going back to her line of thoughts to plan for her course of action---

The slimy gait of those creatures that had sounded continuously for all these time suddenly stopped **at the same time**.

Although Yō had lifted her head abruptly, it was already too late by the time she noted the significance behind the strange phenomenon.

"……Crap."

"Eh?"

"We're surrounded! Everyone, get ready to run---!"

---*Klunk Bam!* Something flew in from the windows. Turning back to look, there stood a human shaped tōjūkasō that was slowly lifting its sickle shaped neck towards their direction.

As their eyes met, the screams of the children in fear echoed in the ruins.

Acting immediately without fear, Yō destroyed the reddish black frame of the enemy with her kick and took the chance to smash through the ruins as she shouted back at them:

"Quick! Run!"

"Y..Yes!"

Under Yō's guidance, the children followed the outer walls of the Citadel as they ran.

"Sorry for this, but thank you Kirino-chan."

"It's nothing! We should hurry to catch up with the oth---"

"---PUGYAAAAAAaaa!"

Kirino and Garol turned their heads sharply to look behind them.

To see…… A few tōjūkasōes launching into the air as they targeted the injured members of the party. But at the same time, Yō seemed to ski through the air to place herself before Garol and Kirino while whipping up a whirlwind to fend off their attacks.

"Yō, Yō-san……!"

"Horrid……they sure are tough and irritating!"

Stretching out her hands to add to the spinning motion, Yō sent the attackers flying into the walls and taking the opportunity of their momentary paralysis to smash through the fungi sacs.

Perhaps it looked too good an opportunity to be missed, three other tōjūkasōes had launched themselves towards Yō's exposed back. The first two latched themselves onto Yō's arms while the other tōjūkasōe flung a chunk of rubble that was almost man-sized towards Yō.

Using her brute strength, Yō swung her arms to use the tōjūkasōes latched upon them to meet the incoming projectile, smashing their fungi sacs with the impact.

And before the last one could execute its next move, Yō had already delivered a punch right through its chest.

The whole act of defending and attacking had passed within a matter of seconds and Yō's execution of that bold and straightforward combat style caused a look of surprise and wonder to contort Garol's face.

"That's… that's quite a feat. Yō-san, you sure aren't just a simple character……! The fungi sacs of the tōjūkasōes are as hard as a chunk of metal. To be so easily destroyed by your strikes…… Are you really human?"

"Nn. In terms of DNA, I'm human."

"Huh?"

Garol-dono tilted his head to one side.

Yō smiled wryly as she had intended to crack a little joke but it would seem that the other had not understood the joke.

[…… But, it sure is strange. For I can also tell that the opponents here weren't weak either.]

Giving the corpse of the tōjūkasō a glance, Yō tilted her head skeptically. All the opponents here were definitely not weaklings.

Amongst all the enemies she had fought till now, the level of these tōjūkasōes could be said to be around the level of the toraningen of [Fores Garo]---a Demonified Galdo Gasper.

And now she had just destroyed thirteen creatures of that level without a scratch on her. If she were to try explain the situation as being in her top form, the steep improvement of her abilities was very strange indeed.

[Could it be that I've befriended a strong Eudemon without knowing about it…?]

Yō cocked her head to one side as she was immersed in her thoughts but still, she couldn't find the answer.

However, reality did not spare her more time to mull over such things for the terrified screams of the children had travelled over from a short distance away.

"Kyaaa!"

"Uu….Oh no---!"

Yō clicked her tongue as she turned about. The children who had escaped earlier were now under attack.

In an anxious tone, Yō shouted to the two of them:

"Clench your teeth and be prepared!"

"What?"

Kirino and Garol tilted their heads in confusion.

Sparing no further explanation, Yō raised her hands to release whirlwinds to lift them up.

"Ah….Wa!"

"Woaaaaah! Yō, Yan-san! Isn't this the Gift of the Gryphons?! How are you able……"

“Stop talking, you will bite your tongue!”

Yō’s tone had taken a rare blunt and agitated edge to it, and it was evident that the situation was that urgent and pressing.

Rapidly turning around, Yō sped along the Outer walls. After all, to be alerted by the cries of the children would surely have meant that the attack had started and she might be one step too late.

The worst possible scenario was floating to the surface of her mind and Yō couldn’t stop the cold sweat that was forming on her back. But a familiar voice seemed to stimulate her eardrums as she got closer.

“ ---YAFUFUFUFUUuuuuuuu!”

Just then, a blast of hot air swept across the area.

“That voice just now…… Could it be……?!”

Yō made a left turn at the crossroads between the Outer wall and the citadel ruins and a gust of hot air swept past her cheeks.

And before her, the one who was displaying his power was the Pumpkin Ghost---Jack-O’- Lantern.

Jack was using his huge palms to smash the charred enemies while leading the children with his loud and hearty laugh.

“Yahohoho! Although I wasn’t summoned, I, Jack decided to show up here! Children, you guys are okay right?!”

“Y…Yes!”

"Good to hear that! I will be here to delay these guys, so please run quickly into the ruins over there!"

"Yahohoho!" Jack gave a hearty laugh as he swung the lamp with both hands to scatter the flames of hell in all directions. The children who were almost caught up in his flames scuttled quickly and raced each other to get into the safety of the ruins.

Ayesha who rode on Jack's Pumpkin head confirmed in a low voice:

"All of them have gone in to hide already, Jack-san."

"……Got it."

The cheerful voice of Jack had gained several degrees of solemnness.

At the same time, Jack's spiritual level started to expand and bloat up.

The steady glow in the hollows that were his eyes had also changed. In that moment, the flame that resided in that Pumpkin Head was an angry flame that was prepared to burn all its enemies to nothingness.

"---How dare you try eat these children even after seeing the flag of [Will-O'-Wisp]. Such ignorance and blatant disrespect. Looks like you guys don't know the Cause that our Flag stands for!"

"…..Jack?"

Yō muttered his name but she was too far and Jack wasn't able to hear her. Moreover Jack's current appearance was clearly different from normal.

Jack who was spewing flames and emitting waves of hot air all over his body was staring at his enemies viciously---

"I shall teach you guys since you seem ignorant of it. Learn well from my flames of hell and thoroughly regret! Brand the image of our Flag with the Azure Flames into your minds---for the flag of [Will-O'-Wisp] will never leave young children to die!"

"That's right! Let's do it now, Jack-san!"

Pak! With the snap of her finger, seven lanterns that burned with the flames of hell appeared above her head. And at the same time when the lids of the lanterns were unlatched, the raging flames immediately bloated and spilt outwards.

Garol who was beside Yō had turned pale immediately and started to yell:

"Oi……OiOi, are they serious about that?! To actually directly summon the Flames of Purgatory into this world, that's not something that any normal demon can do! Are they planning to burn away the Outskirts of the Citadel as well?!"

"Huh? Are we in danger?"

"Very Dangerous! Escape now, Yō-chan!"

Just as Garol's yell left his lips, the scene before them was swept with a blistering hot whirlwind that seemed like the opening of the doors to Hell's furnace.

The things that were burnt by the flames from the depths of Hell's abyss weren't only limited to the mere weeds that were growing around the place.

The ground was charred and the air had also heated up to a blistering hot temperature and the enemies had all been vaporised without a trace.

The raging purgatory flames were spreading outwards, seeming to swallow the Citadel Outskirts in its path and had also seemed like the arm of a Demon as it seeks its enemies and burnt them to death.

Watching this scene from the sides, Yō couldn't help but feel flustered.

"Woah, Woahwoahwoah……"

Yō rapidly flew higher into the skies to escape the heat. Although she had successfully managed to escape, a hair breath away from getting charred, the area of the spell effect was really abnormal.

"**Yahohohohohohohoho! BURN FURIOUSLY!**"

At the centre of the blistering hot winds, a lively and merry shout could be heard.

Seeing Jack sway his Pumpkin head and the tattered cloak that was his body, the thought struck Yō for the first time.

Jack-O'- Lantern---truly is a Herald created from a Demon.

The trio waited in the air for a while before slowly descending to the ground after confirming that the fires had begun to calm down. And now, Jack and Ayesha finally noticed Yō.

"Oh? That's…"

"Ah, Yō-chan! What? You were also caught and brought here like these children?"

"……No. I'm here to rescue the people who have been caught."

Yō unhappily rebuked his suggestion.

Hearing her reply, Jack seemed a little disappointed as he tilted his Pumpkin Head.

"……Aiyaya. You sure didn't change a bit."

"Eh?"

"Well, let's not talk about that first. This place is too dangerous. Let's meet up with the other participants first."

Yō nodded her head at Jack's suggestion. But Garol furrowed his brows in bewilderment.

"Oh so you still dare to mention that. With the purgatory flames that you have summoned, who could still survive that?"

"Garol-dono, be rest assured. We have Familiars who have already brought the contestants to a safe place."

Pak! Jack snapped his finger loudly and a group of two legged candle holders and little puppets that held lanterns started to run over with the sounds of their feet pattering against the ground as they did so.

There were a total of fifteen. The blue haired puppet that seemed to be the leader tottered up to Jack and gave a bow.

"Thank you for your hard work. Are the others fine?"

"Lan~tern ♪"

"Good. Then call those people you have protected to come over. If you tell them that Garol-dono is here, they will be willing to follow you over without much hassle."

"Lan~tern ♪"

The candlestick holders and puppets that held lanterns started to scatter away in all directions after giving the reply.

Garol backed down as he gave a witty comment.

"Oh I see. What an amazing Pumpkin Ghost."

"Yahoho! Though that might be so, it's still not the time to be careless. I will be leaving the call for the subsequent actions to you, Garol-dono."

"……the subsequent actions? To escape?"

Yō tilted her head as she asked Jack.

But Jack shook his Pumpkin Head.

"Escape is only a short term solution. At least for all the people here, it would seem that we all meet the criteria for the Punishment conditions."

"……eh?"

"Kasukabe-san, do you have a Gift card on you? If you have, please take it out to have a look at it."

"O…Okay."

Yō hurriedly took out the pearl emerald Gift Card from her pocket to take a look.

Upon seeing it, she was momentarily stumped for words.

"The card……seems to have a text that I've not seen before…?"

"That is the [Punishment Notification]. Participants who have met the criteria of the Host's punishment conditions will have the Flag of the Host carved onto the Geass Roll and Gift Card."

Jack took out his Geass Roll and pointed at the Punishment(s) section.

<<GIFT GAME NAME: "SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING">>

Punishment(s):

*A time limit will be imposed upon all the participants who have targeted and fought against the leader of the game.

*The time limit will be a continuous time loop that occurs every ten days.

*The choice of punishment will be chosen randomly from [Impaling], [Crucifixion], and [Immolation].

*The only way to be freed of the punishment would be to clear the game or during a pause in the game.

*#The death of the participant is not included within the conditions to be freed from the punishment and they will continue to suffer indefinitely.

"……? Bu……But, I've not fought with the game leader……against Leticia."

"But the reality is that we have already met the criteria for the punishment. So, there can only be one possibility."

Jack replied in a solemn tone and Yō finally realized.

If the huge dragon was the Game leader…… Then fighting with its clones would still count towards the fulfilling of the conditions.

"……That huge dragon is Leticia?"

"No idea. But there's one thing I'm sure of."

Jack turned his Pumpkin head towards the stormy skies that surrounded the Ancient Citadel as he gazed upon it with the flickering flames in the hollows.

"If we are unable to defeat the [Draculea Demon Lord]……Then ten days later, this place will be drenched in a storm of blood. For we would be impaled as recorded in the legends."

Interlude 2

Part 1

---[Underwood] Harvest Festival Headquarters.

When day broke on the second day, Izayoi and the others had already left for the Alliance Discussion Hall that was situated within the belly of the Huge tree's Hollow. And the Communities that had gathered here were four in total:

Leader of [One Horn] and also the representative for the [Draco Greif] Alliance, Sala Doltrake.

Stand-in Leader of [Six Scars], Carol Gundark.

The stand-in strategist of [Will-O'-Wisp], Faceless.

Leader of [No Name], Jin Russel with Sakamaki Izayoi and Kudou Asuka.

Kuro Usagi who was acting as the Host for the Discussion, stood at the front as she placed the Power of Attorneys onto the long table before her to start the ball rolling.

"Well then, the following shall be a discussion held for the combat strategies to be used for the Gift Game [SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING]! The direction that the other Communities will be taking have already been suggested in the form of the Power of Attorneys in front of me, here. I would also like to remind the other representatives who similarly hold Power of Attorneys, Sala-sama and Carol-sama to be mindful of that fact. And may we speak with the thought of the responsibilities that we carry."

"Got it."

"Yep Yep!"

Sala had given a sincere reply and Carol had similarly given hers while waving her nicely bent tail.

Izayoi who was standing at the back was surprised as he observed Carol's nicely bent tail that seemed to be her unique trait.

"Could you…Could you be the neko onna who works as a waitress at the café of Outergate number 2105380?'

"Yep, that's right, Okyakusan . Thank you for the frequent patronage♪"

"She's the twenty-fourth daughter of [Six Scars] leader, Garol Gundark-dono. It's said that she had opened a branch of the café at the East Side under the orders of Garol-dono."

"Hehe. It can be counted as a small scale information gathering activity. Regarding the tales of my frequent customers, I've also told all of them as accurately and completely to my father too!"

Oh! Izayoi and Asuka replied in a grudgingly respectful manner. For when they gave it more thought, her news had really been very informative since Day one of their first encounter, but never did they entertain a thought of Carol being the spy sent from the South Side.

Exchanging a glance and a knowing smile with each other, Izayoi and Asuka seemed to have arrived at the idea of a new prank.

"I see. So the reason of a mere waitress at the café being invited to the South Side's Harvest Festival is due to such a matter……But since your little secret has been exposed, we won't be stepping into that café from now on right, Ojou-sama?"

"Yep, you're right. Even all the battle strategies that we have mulled over in that café have been completely leaked by now right? That's really scary…I won't dare to step in there ever again."

"Looks like we can only do our part as the [Region Master] of Outergate number 2105380 to propagate the warning to all the fellow Communities in the region. For example:[There's a spy hiding under the flag of [Six Scars]!]"

Izayoi and Asuka were energetically discussing about the future measures with the intention of letting everyone around hear of their talk.

A flustered Carol had immediately perked her nekomimi and her bent tail.

"EH…Wait, Hey, Please wait for a moment! If you guys really did that, the café would surely be unable to continue anymore!"

"Oh my…But that so doesn't concern us. We have a duty to ensure the development and security of the region. How can we close an eye to the café that is indiscreetly carrying out its spying activities?"

"If you really want us to close an eye to your activities…… you should at least have what they call a [Befitting Attitude] right?"

The two problem children revealed their evil grins as they plotted maliciously to pressure Carol into a corner. That scene was like a businessman, who was surrounded by the evil and corrupt government officials, trying to seek for protection with bribery.

Carol was pressured to the edge of crying as she turned her head away while twiddling her fingers as she said in a sorrowful tone:

"From…From today onwards, only limited to the members of [No Name], my café shall be providing you guys a privilege price of 90% on all purchases---"

"Nope 70%."

"Meouuuuuwwww! Sa…Sala-sama~!"

"Aw, be obedient now. Just remember not to have such rash talks that expose your identity and mission again."

Sala was gently stroking Carol's head and nekomimi but her words were quite sharp too.

Sakamaki Izayoi and Kudou Asuka lightly gave each other a Hi-five.

Kuro Usagi and Jin couldn't help but blush red to their [rabbit] ears upon seeing the underhanded methods of their comrades.

Faceless who was quietly watching the situation playing out before her without interrupting finally raised her hand slowly.

"---Can we get back on topic?"

"……Ah, Ye…Yes!"

Kuro Usagi hurriedly straightened her back as she resumed her proper posture.

Part 2

---Above [Underwood] Ancient Vampire Citadel, Outskirts.

One night has passed and the people who had been brought to the outskirts of the Citadel had decided to rest for now. Due to their position being in the skies, the winds were a little strong and chilly. Although they were just ruins, they were still usable as structures to help block out the bone-chilling night winds.

Initially, Yō had worried about water and food supplies but that worry was answered soon enough.

Garol and Jack's Gift Cards had stored many dried foodstuffs as well as branches prepared from the Water Tree.

"Listen up, Yō ojou-chan . There's a need to prepare for a drawn out battle with Demon Lords. Even if it isn't to fight Demon Lords, there's also a chance that you may get into an accident in Little Garden and happen to have no one else beside you to depend on. So, water tree or water pearl items that can ensure a water source is a necessary Gift."

"Oh…I see…"

"Yahoho! And Gift cards can be used to store the harvested fruits from your own Community's farmlands or even meat products from the animals that you rear in the farm. Like how it is always mentioned time and again, better prepared than never."

Jack laughed heartily while Yō was really impressed:

"Is it so…… I see. So Gift cards are really that convenient."

"Of course. After all, these have been created by the famous main branch of [Thousand Eyes], the [Laplace Demons], as a masterpiece against Demon Lords. Having the [Fragment of Laplace] during a fight with a Demon Lord will have a lot of influence on your survivability. It's a really important Gift."

"……Is it?" Yō replied. Having been given Gift Cards from Shiroyasha, it could have been an act to give them the necessities to prepare for a fight against Demon Lords.

Yō delivered the food whipped up from mutton jerkies into her mouth to slowly chew and taste……It was definitely not too bad, but it couldn't be called a gourmet. Probably a little higher than the standard of cheap cup noodles. Yō couldn't help but long for the food of her Community back at the Community grounds.

"……I miss Lily's cooking."

"Hnm? Did you say something?"

"Nothing."

After all, having something to eat was better than nothing and Yō stuffed the food into her mouth like a squirrel as her cheeks puffed up with the food.

Ayesha who was sitting beside her was staring at her with wide round eyes as she noticed Yō's actions.

"Oi……Listen! If you stuff all the food in like that, you will get choked. That's a jerky you know? You should be chewing on it slowly before…"

"----------Uu!"

"……That's why I said not to devour so quickly!"

"Just joking."

"Ah? Just joking? Oi. This kind of matter shouldn't be played around with! It can give people a fright you know?!"

Yō was teasing Ayesha while dining. Whereas Kirino was watching over the boiling of a broth in a pot that was made out of glass shaped by Ayesha herself. It was a glass pot that wouldn't explode or crack even upon placing it above direct heat and exposed to sudden contractions or expansions. It was also quite interesting to be able to see the ingredients change in form and texture as they were slowly being boiled in the pot.

"Hmm~ Ayesha can also create such an intricate piece of glassware."

"Of course. Not only can I control fire. I can also process the materials that would form the glass."

"……Is it? If I remember correctly, you are a type of Gnome right?"

"Yep, but I'm currently still unable to replicate the level of skill and technique that can be found in Jack-san's Glassware."

"Even so, that's already quite amazing for I don't have that ability to create Gifts from scratch."

Yō gave her honest and forthright compliment as she stuffed another grilled mutton into her mouth.

Perhaps the praises caused her to feel a little bashful and Ayesha gave a little laugh of "Heh Heh" before smiling wryly. Whereas Yō used the opportunity to stuff another piece of meat into her mouth.

Jack who needn't consume any food couldn't help but smile as he looked at them with their little conversation while asking softly:

"Come to think about it, Kasukabe-san. Seeing how the headphones are still hanging around your neck……You haven't had the chance to pass it to him?"

Yō, the one in question became pensive while continuing to stuff another piece of meat into her mouth.

Giving the jerky a few more chews and washing it down with some soup, Yō then gave a light cough before answering:

"Nn. And the Dormitory was wrecked, so I guessed that it would be best kept on me."

"But these headphones are different from the ones you wanted right?"

"Well, you can say that……But regardless of the shape, I guess the most important thing would still be to show some sincerity. Especially since Izayoi is the kind who would be very particular about the sincerity behind an action."

Yō scratched her head as she answered with uncertainty in her voice. Although the time spent with Izayoi was a short one, Yō believed that he wasn't the kind who would trample over the sincerity and hard efforts that others might bring forth in their attempt to apologize.

Jack stared at Yō for a little while longer before breaking into a smile:

"……Yahoho! Seems like it was an unnecessary worry on my part!"

"Unnecessary worry?"

"No, it's nothing, just my own problem! Yahohohoho!"

Jack shook his pumpkin head as he laughed.

Though Yō tilted her head in confusion, she did not press the matter further but only made a move to stuff another piece of meat into her mouth.

When everyone have finished their meal, Garol gathered the main members of their company---Kasukabe Yō, Jack, Ayesha and Kirino who represented the children to start the strategic meeting on the steps that they would take from now on.

“Regarding our movements from now on……I would like to listen to everyone’s opinion. Do any of you have a suggestion?”

“Nn.”

Yō immediately gave her reply and Garol nodded to her to continue.

“I think……Everyone should stay here together to solve the riddle of the Game.”

“……Oh?”

Hearing Yō’s suggestion, Garol gave off something between a low moan and a growl.

“You mean that we should stay and fight? And why is that so?”

“I’ve also discussed with Jack yesterday and have already confirmed for a fact that we would be punished. Even if we escape now, we would still die ten days later when the punishment comes down upon us. But taking the opportunity that the Trial Jurisdiction has bought for us, even the children can safely search the rubble and ruins of the Ancient Citadel.”

Yō’s suggestion caused Garol’s face to become taut.

"Wait. Wait a moment! Yō ojou-chan also intends to let the little brats join the battle?!"

"Nope. My point was that there's no need for them to battle. During this time when the Trial Jurisdiction is in place, the Host and Participants are not allowed to engage in combat. So this would make it the best time for them to safely do a search with us."

Now that there weren't any other enemies around, it gave them free rein of roaming the Citadel---Yō had seen that chance and hence came up with that suggestion.

Moreover, when it came down to searching for information, having numbers would definitely be better. Moreover, the situation was that out of fifty of the people brought to this place, forty of them were children. If the search were to be done with the subtraction of their number, there should be a major difference in the search efficiency.

Listening from the side, Jack touched his Pumpkin head while expressing a partial agreement to her plans.

"Kasukabe-san's suggestion would surely help to contribute greatly to the solving of the Game……But, how are their thoughts on the matter? Have the children's reply been obtained?"

And the whole group turned their sights on Kirino. Though she shrank away under their sudden attention, Kirino still managed to express in a clear and informed voice as she spoke up for the others:

"Thank…Thank you all for your concern of our safety. But we are still part of [Underwood] and we will not stand by to see our hibernating ancient faerie be pushed into a corner."

And determination was overflowing in Kirino's reply.

That look of hers seemed very similar to the children of [No Name] and that made Yō feel a little amused.

Garol folded his arms as he sank into a pensive silence before taking out the black goatskin parchment, which he had kept close to his chest, as he gave in not without a few conditions.

"……Well then, I get it. Since the young ones have spoken, I should also set my resolve as well. But how should we go about doing this? Conducting a search without any leads in mind would be a waste of time. If you, Yō ojou-chan don't have a clue on that, I will not agree to it."

"Nn. About that matter, I do have a suggestion…… Or should I say, about the winning conditions, I may have found a solution to stop the game and yet maybe not……"

Yō's voice had started to drift off, becoming softer towards the end.

But the people around her did not care about such trivialities as they asked at the same time:

"Ka…Kasukabe-san, you've solved the riddle already?"

"It's not really a complete solving ……but I think it should be counted as something that kind of flows well with the reasoning……"

"Is that true?! That's really great!"

"Yep, that's really impressive! Solving the riddle on the first day of cease-fire, I'm already seeing the ray of light that leads to victory!"

"Yō-san is really great!"

Being praised by the four of them caused Yō to have cold sweat.

If her conjecture was wrong, there would be nothing that she could take back……Her heart was thinking about that with much trepidation as she carefully phrased her words:

"Hmm…before starting on my conjecture… to have some cross reference to check if my conjecture is true, may I ask a few questions first?"

"Of course! Ask away!"

"Yahoho! I'd be willing to give you the needed information!"

Everyone leaned forward while Yō smiled wryly thinking that she mustn't screw up this time. But she soon took on a serious expression.

"---Firstly, I would like to confirm a premise of my conjecture. Are the vampires of Little Garden a race that have migrated over from another world?"

"Nn. That's right."

"And this Sky Citadel had also appeared during that time?"

"Although there's no concrete proof, but from the records that have been passed down since those times, the vampire race had escaped to Little Garden due to being unable to stay in their former world any longer."

"……In other words, they have come to Little Garden to escape their own world?"

"Yahoho! That's not something to be surprised about you know?! It's not uncommon to see many races that have come to this world due to various reasons that may have arisen in their former worlds."

"Yep. Just like the descendants of [Hiderigami] who have once caused trouble in South Side and even the Titan tribes who had been chased out of their homelands after losing their wars. The Vampire race should also have experienced something that caused them to be driven out of their homeland right?"

"That's correct. There's an example that is more famous……I've heard that the first time that the Vampires bathed in the Sun was in Little Garden and hence from that day on, they have taken up the responsibility of being the [Knights of Little Garden] as they maintained the peace of this place…… Perhaps the event that caused them to migrate from their homeland might have a connection with this."

"Is that so…?" Yō replied before lapsing into silence. She had also heard of this story.

---The reason for their title as the [Knights of Little Garden] was due to them wanting to protect the cities of Little Garden where they were able to enjoy the gift of the Sun's warmth.

To be able to enjoy sunlight here when they weren't able to do so in their previous homeland, this place would surely seem like heaven for Vampires.

But thinking of that, another question surfaced in Yō's mind.

"……But isn't it the job of the [Floor Master] to be in charge of protecting the peace of Little Garden? Then to be given the title of the [Knights of Little

Garden]……doesn't that mean that the Vampires have previously served as the [Floor Master]?"

Garol gave a 'Oh?' as he gave a smile that seemed to praise Yō.

"Yō ojou-chan's brain works quite fast eh? You've guessed two thirds of the correct answer."

"Nn. Is that good or not? Anyways, what's the correct answer?"

"Actually when Little Garden first started, there didn't exist the positions of [Floor Master]s. During that time, it was all based on the Outer gate where they would choose an [Outer Gate Master], and it was all to be left to these individuals to have their own judgments as well as to govern the respective region."

"……Then it shouldn't be rare for Regional Dictatorships to occur right?"

"Yep. Especially during the dawning of Little Garden's formation, it really was a hellish place where all the demigods and gods were fighting and causing confusion! It's said that if Communities of the lower levels had their Authorities over the Outer Gate snatched away from them, it would really be a pitiful end for them! For example, they could make the ruling such that the cost to use the [Astral Gate] be a hundred gold coins each time! With that high a price, the residents wouldn't be able to escape the OuterGate and hence become enslaved to the end of their lives."

After saying so much, Garol lifted his shoulders up and tilted his head left and right to loosen the muscles.

"……Eh? With the Authority over the [Astral Gate], one can decide on the price to set for the usage fees?"

"Hmm? Oh,Oh, of course. Even now, as long as it is within the range set by the [Floor Master], it is still possible to have it increased or decreased."

"Yahoho……I will just say it here that from North Side to get to South Side, the price is really expensive and seeming out for your necks. It's around five times the usual price."

"Five ……"

Yō was momentarily stumped for words. Five times would mean……A fee of five gold coins per person.

If it were the [No Name] a month ago, this would have already cleared out their treasury and cause them to go into a perilous situation.

But if [No Name] were to set the fees like that as well, they would be able to rake in 80 percent of the fees, so---

"……Nn. Let's get back to the main topic." Yō urged the others to continue the discussion for she was trying to shake off the tempting evil thoughts that were creeping into her mind.

"That would be great."

Ayesha saw her chance to tease Yō there and then but noting that the situation was not one that was suitable for such a deed, she could only hold back her laughter and let it slide by.

"Anyways, to restore the order in the lower levels that seemed on the verge of being annihilated, the [Knights of Little Garden]---who are of the Vampire race, lifted their Flag. Utilizing their extraordinary strength and intelligence, they defeated evil

Demon Lords one after another. And it just happened that the battle for the Star Authorities in the mid to upper levels of the OuterGates have also come to an end. So most of the Demon Lords in the Mid to lower levels were purged. Although there were still some Demon Lords that are invincible and undefeated and others that have escaped into the other worlds……but as a whole, Little Garden had managed to welcome a period of stability. From then on, the lower levels had this rule of having its Outer Gates to be interlinked with the [Knights of Little Garden] as the centre. And after the setting up of rules and legislations, the system of [Floor Master] and [Region Master] were also implemented with them being widely accepted as the [Overall Floor Master] who protects the lower levels of the North, South, East and West Sides."

Pak Pak! The sound of claps began to sound in the area.

"……what comes next? Happily ever after?"

"How could that be……"

Yō smiled wryly as she replied: "Right…"

"Although the vampires have successfully led to the formation of the system of [Floor Master]s who would defend the lower levels and care for them……but it wasn't before long that all the vampires were massacred by their Vampire King."

"Eh?"

"The one responsible for the massacre is none other than the [Demon Lord of Impalement]---Just at the age of twelve, the strongest Kyuketsuki Hime who ascended the position as the [Dragon Knight], Leticia Draculea."

Part 3

Ahem! Kuro Usagi cleared her throat loudly before continuing to lead the discussion.

“Then let’s start by discussing the strategies on the Game. But before that, Sala-sama has a few words that she wants to say first.”

[What could it be?] Everyone in the room were tilting their head in puzzlement.

Sala stood up from her seat and swept her gaze around everyone in the room.

Sala gave a deep sigh as her face was clouded over with worry.

“……The words that I’m about to tell you guys, please keep it a secret confined to the people of this room. Please be mindful never to let a word of it spread around.”

“……Yes, I understand.”

Jin represented all the rest to give his reply first and the other people around had also nodded their heads silently though the solemnness of this speech Sala was giving, caused every one of them to furrow their brows skeptically.

Sala closed her eyes for a while in deliberation before opening her mouth again to say:

“Firstly I would like to say that when the [Golden Harp] was repossessed by the enemy, [The Death Eye of Balor] has also been stolen away.”

“Ba…[The Death Eye of Balor]?!”

“Is that for real?”

"Yes. Although it isn't a Gift that any normal Titan can use……but with that, the Titan tribes would surely have gained a strong weapon on their side. We must also take into account of that and draw up strategies to deal with it. So everyone, please be mentally prepared."

At this point, Sala paused for a while and the solemn expression was etched more deeply into her facial features.

"And the other matter I want to say is...Before the Game entered its ceasefire, I had received the urgent reports from the North and East Sides……According to the reports, it seems that Demon Lords have not appeared in [Underwood] only."

"……what?"

"The North Side's [Floor Master] [Salamandra] and [OniHime] Alliance, and [Floor Master] of the East whom you guys should be quite acquainted with, the [Thousand Eyes] cadre's Shiroyasha-sama---All three of the above mentioned Communities have been hit by the violent invasion of Demon Lords simultaneously."

The sounds of everyone sucking in their breath in surprise echoed in the Discussion Hall. Even Kuro Usagi who was in charge of the position as the host of the discussion was frozen and slack-jawed, evidently having heard it for the first time.

If this piece of news were to be true, it would mean that there were at least four Demon Lords who had descended upon Little Garden currently.

Even for Asuka and Izayoi who have only recently arrived and stayed in Little Garden for a short while, they were still able to immediately see the strangeness and the severity of the situation.

Asuka whispered to Izayoi who sat beside her:

"This shouldn't be coincidental right? In an attempt to overthrow the [Floor Master]s, there's a Strong Demon Lord that is leading several other Demon Lords into action…… that's what it is right?"

"Yea no doubt about that……but I see it now. Since there's such a situation, it would make sense and solves another question that I had."

"What?"

Sala shot her question in reflex. It was the phrase of [make sense] and not [I understand] that minor difference in the word usage that caused her to be mindful.

Izayoi unfolded his arms and leaned forward as he asked:

"You're Sala right? I heard that you were originally the successor of [Salamandra], is that true?"

"……That's right. What's with that?"

"Then have you heard of the Demon Lord that appeared at the [Birth of the Fire Dragon Festival] that [Salamandra] hosted last month?"

"Of course. Although I've left my hometown, but it's still my former Community and my hometown that have been attacked."

Sala frowned darkly. Perhaps she felt that Izayoi was looking down on her.

But Izayoi's expression had sobered up considerably with solemnness as he swept his gaze over everyone gathered in the room.

"Then, let me ask you, the one who came from the North……Have you heard that the one who attracted the Demon Lord was [Salamandra] itself?"

"What did you say?!"

Asuka stood up as she interrupted the conversation with a shout. Her surprised expression had far exceeded the previous expression she wore and was completely incomparable.

But this was to be expected. For that would mean that the death match they had participated in was due to the invited trouble of the ones whom she thought of as comrades in arms. That thought had definitely not crossed Asuka's mind.

The person who was on the receiving end of the question had clenched her teeth while her face had grown taut as she lightly shook her head.

"……that's the first time I've heard of it. But since Otou-sama is still around, that is something that sounds very much like him."

"Otou-sama? You and Sandra's father?"

"Yes. That person is one who wouldn't care about the methods even if his comrades die. As long as it is something that is advantageous for the Community, he will do it…… Even if it may have caused the death of Sandra in the [Birth of the Fire Dragon Festival], he must have thought that he could still seat upon the position as leader once more to solve the problem."

"But, But I heard that the former leader of [Salamandra] is bedridden due to illness……"

"Just a little pain from illness isn't able to make that guy go down. Moreover, he most probably planned to use young Sandra as the shield while he continued to control things in the dark which would be safer for him."

Hng! Sala harrumphed openly at that.

Kuro Usagi's rabbit ears drooped as she seemed to ask dejectedly:

"Then……Then what could Sala-sama's Otou-sama be trying to benefit from doing such a thing?"

"Who knows? But in the case where Otou-sama is really sick and bedridden……I would guess that it would be an attempt to let Sandra's name be known throughout the lands that cause him to specially invite a Demon Lord……but regarding the secrets behind that matter, I would guess that the lad sitting over there would be more knowledgeable about it."

Sala looked pointedly at Izayoi while he took on a bemused expression as he replied:

"I guess that's more or less the case. Before hearing the situation from you, I'd thought that it would be that way too. Moreover, looking at the attitude of that Mandra guy, it would seem that he had also believed in that cause……but, it would seem that the situation isn't that simple after all."

"And your meaning is?"

"Kuro Usagi, let's just think for a moment shall we? The one who attacked during the Festival of the [Birth of the Fire Dragon], [Black Death Demon Lord]---Percher's aim **wasn't to target Sandra but was instead aiming for Shiroyasha right?**"

Kuro Usagi drew her breath sharply at that. Hearing his words, it did seem to be that way.

[Black Death Demon Lord] wants to seek revenge on the Authority of the Sun. Moreover, she's also possessed the very rare [Authority of Host Master] that had [The ability to seal Sun's Star-class spirits]."

To defeat the strongest [Floor Master] Shiroyasha, it can be said that Percher was the best possible candidate for the task.

"The host for the [Birth of the Fire Dragon Festival] is Sandra. Shiroyasha is merely a guest of honour who visited without the entourage of the main force of [Thousand Eyes]……It might be possible that the Festival was a trap laid to defeat Shiroyasha."

Izayoi's conjecture caused Jin to be boggled into realization as he cried out:

"Oh…Right! I heard that during the same time when Shiroysasha-sama was under attack, the South Side's [Floor Master] had also been attacked and defeated……If we were to link them up to a common mastermind behind all these incidents---!"

"That's right. In other words, these guys—let's just call them as a collective term of [Demon Lord Alliance] for now, plans to attack and put down all of the [Floor Masters] it drives them to launch their simultaneous attacks……And there should be some kind of organization behind them that helps them to connect and coordinate to allow the Demon Lords to battle in an advantageous condition." Izayoi ended with casting his sharp gaze towards Sala.

The speech caused Sala to be alarmed. Although she didn't see eye to eye with her father's actions and had already left her homeland, but Sala did not want to believe that her family and homeland could have fallen to that despicable level. So she posed her question to confirm, albeit with unease.

"Lad. Are you hinting that……my father is the mastermind behind these incidents?"

"Nope, I'm unable to confirm that sort of detail at this point. So far, only half of what I've said are circumstantial evidence but the most important part of the motive behind such acts still remain unknown. And if we look at the root of the problem, what could be the purpose of getting rid of the other [Floor Master]s?"

Izayoi sank into deep thoughts and it did not look like an act.

Sala finally found a small respite for herself but Faceless seemed intent on giving it a follow-up attack as she added:

"……Sala-sama. Currently, the [Floor Masters] are [Salamandra], [OniHime] Alliance, Shiroyasha of [Thousand Eyes] and the one who's still in hibernation [Laplace Demon] these four right?"

"Hm? Yep, that should be correct."

"If the first three were to be destroyed, all of the [Floor Master]s will lose their ability to function and it will require someone to ascend the position to take command as the [Overall Floor Master]. Could the enemy's goal be that?"

"What?" Came the same reply though from the different mouths of everyone at the same time.

Sala, Jin and Kuro Usagi also seemed to be unclear of the situation as they tilted their heads, baffled.

"I've heard [Queen Halloween] bringing it up before in the past. If the [Floor Master]s were to be incapacitated, or if it were to be left with only one person, it would tentatively open up a position within the four digit Outer Gates and a Gift that befits the position---One of the Authorities of the Sun and also the Authority of choosing the next batch of [Floor Master]s in the North South East and West Sides."

"Sun…A Sun Authority and a tentative position in the four digits?!"

"So …So there's also such a system?!"

Kuro Usagi and Sala questioned in alarm.

---An Authority over the Sun's trajectory in Little Garden.

In Little Garden where many demigods, gods and Buddhas lived, there exists the control over the many different Stars and Planets and that's called the Authority.

The demonic star, Algol that [Perseus] had was one such example. As long as one held the Authority over the Stars, they would be given the power to summon and command the Star class spirits or Deities that possessed a huge amount of power.

As for the Sun's Authority that represents the most number of Gods and Buddhas, it is divided into twenty-four parts by means of the constellations.

The twelve constellations recorded within the [Ecliptic path of the Twelve Zodiacs]: Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces.

The twelve time sectors(Chén) recorded within the [Ecliptic path of the Twelve Chén] : Zi, Chou, Yin, Mao, Chen, Si, Wu Wei, Shen, You, Xu and Hai.

According to these two types of Celestial divisions, the Sun Authorities can be divided into twenty-four parts.

"Even I do not know of the Authority that will be given. But according to my Queen, there had only been two predecessors who have sat upon that position as [Overall Floor Master] and they are Shiroyasha and the First generation [Floor Master]---Leticia Draculea."

"Le…Leticia-sama is a [Overall Floor Master]……?!"

Due to her surprise, Kuro Usagi's voice had risen considerably in volume. However, that only caused Faceless to be surprised as well.

"……As a [Highborn of Little Garden], you actually do not know of the story behind the [Knights of Little Garden]?"

"Ku…Kuro Usagi's the youngest generation of her race and can be considered to be very young, so she doesn't know much about the histories……"

Kuro Usagi's rabbit ears drooped as she turned her face away.

Izayoi sighed as he shook his head before extending a helping hand to Kuro Usagi:

"Forget it……It's nobody's fault that Kuro Usagi here is actually [Highborn of Little Garden(lol)]."

"Please do not attempt to make that nickname be set into stone!"

Kuro Usagi had perked her rabbit ears in anger.

Faceless used her hand to rub her chin as she pondered for a moment.

"……I see. So she's [Highborn of Little Garden(lol)] huh?"

"May I ask of you not to use such a serious face to join into that topic?!"

Seeing how Faceless had joined in after catching on quickly, Asuka expressed her dissent unhappily:

"You are just an outsider that has appeared not too long ago, don't talk as if you know Kuro Usagi very well. And from how it progressed just now, she should be called [(Shameful)Highborn of Little Garden] to follow the flow right?"

"Wait…"

"That's it! Good one!"

"What's 'That's it! Good one!' eh? You BakAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaas!"

PakPak! Kuro Usagi used her favorite paper fan that had been a while since its last use to show its power.

Faceless observed the three of them having their happy exchange of squabbling and suddenly blurted out the words:

"……[(Shameful)Highborn of Little Garden]."

"If this continues to be the topic, then there's no way that we can resume our serious atmosphere anymore, so just take it that I'm pleading for you guys to stop it!"

Pak! Kuro Usagi seemed weary as she lifted her paper fan to slap another time.

Perhaps the atmosphere wasn't high enough for Faceless rekindled her spirit---

"……[(Shameful)Highborn of Little Garden]."

"Didn't I say to stop it? BAKAAAAAAaaaaa!"

*Swish!*Kuro Usagi swung her paper fan with a loud sound that wasn't heard off before to launch her strongest strike.

After that, Faceless took on an attitude like as though nothing had happened as she continued the topic.

"……As a [Highborn of Little Garden], you actually do not know of the story behind the [Knights of Little Garden]?"

"Start…Starting from that same place again sure causes Kuro Usagi to not know how to respond…… Though it's really embarrassing, it is the first time that these rabbit ears of Kuro Usagi have heard of such a thing. Because of how it might give some leads on the current game and the mastermind behind the plot, please tell us all the details you know without holding back any reports."

Kuro Usagi controlled her urge to give her normal tsukomi as she seriously pushed for the continuation of the previous topic.

It would also seem that Faceless had her fill of fun and she replied solemnly:

"What I do know isn't very detailed. So I will just be skipping the details…I've heard that Leticia Draculea who had ascended to the [Overall Floor Master] had wanted to use the Authority and the special rights to launch a war against the upper echelons of demigods, gods and Buddhas."

"Le…Leticia-sama wanting to start a war……?"

The [No Name]s had all looked at each other. That sort of violent description made it difficult to link it to the docile temperament Leticia who was like a big sister character in the Community.

"That war…… caused her to become a Demon Lord?"

"That, I'm not too sure either. I've only heard that to stop this war from happening, the vampires of the same race had started a revolution and from there, they slowly headed for destruction due to the infighting that hacked away at each other's lives."

"Killing…Killing each other within the same race…… Leticia-sama?"

"Yes. This was told to me by my Queen who knew of the situation then, so I'm quite sure that it won't be wrong."

Uu… Kuro Usagi gave a little sound, clearly frightened and robbed of her courage.

Killing each other within their own species---In other words, it was the killings between the comrades of the same Community. Being a part of [No Name], they knew Leticia's character very well and hence it was very difficult to believe that to be true. But Sala who was silently listening to the conversation all this while took out the Geass Roll and seemed to nod in understanding.

"I see……The fourth condition to win:[Following the proper procedure and using the zodiacs that have been restored to the throne as a guide, strike the heart of the revolutionist who is bounded in chains.] Meaning that we have to find and kill the leader of the Revolution of that time right?"

"Is…Is that so?"

"Otherwise, how else can we make head or tail of it? Compared to the terms of [Zodiac] and [broken fragments of the constellations] that are so abstract, these words are much easier to understand. The Vampires of that time were really pushed into a corner due to the punishments met out to them and hence decided to hunt down for the leader of the revolution---"

"---but in the end, the game was still left without being cleared. In other words, the [Leader of the Revolution] may just be a misleading clue left to bait us in the wrong direction."

Uu Though Sala made that small sound, she stared at Izayoi as she retorted:

"No, that's difficult to say. That Leader of the Revolution might still be living in Little Garden somewhere. The Vampire species have quite a long lifespan and it is said that the purebloods of their race will never grow old or die---"

"Then you mean to find that fellow and kill him? In this exaggeratingly big Little Garden, how much time would we waste to find a Vampire that we don't even know if it exists?"

Sala shut her mouth mournfully.

Seeming to say that it was the end of the discussion, Izayoi stood up.

"No matter how you look at it, we can't deny the fact that we do not have enough information. So I've a proposal. Form a defense squad that will stay in this place to defend [Underwood] from the Titan invasion attempts and a squad that will infiltrate the Citadel of the enemy with the purpose to clear the game. There should be many winged Eudemons in [Draco Greif] Alliance right?"

Izayoi gave Jin a pointed look on the sly when he ended his barrage.

And Jin frantically chimed in:

"And the safety of those people who have been taken away is also quite worrying. I've also heard that the important figure in the Alliance, Garol-sama of [Six Scars] had also been captured while protecting his comrades. Let's send out a search party and when they return with their report, let's arrange for another discussion shall we?"

Jin naturally pushed the topic towards the aim of saving Yō, moreover the content of his proposal was also quite reasonable.

Sala did not reject the proposal but had instead, agreed readily to it.

"I got it. Well, I will choose my elites to form the squads by two nights after. When that time comes, I will be requiring the strength of your Communities[looking at the two Communities in turn], so we will be in your care……And another thing , though it is just a small gesture of goodwill, I've already prepared the best top classed Guest rooms for your Communities, so please be well rested."

Under her gesture, all of them stood to leave.

The first day of the meeting that the Participants hosted had come to a close at that.

To get to the [Underwood] Main guest quarters, the group of [No Name]s had taken the water powered elevator to make their gradual descent from the Great Tree's Tree branch. On the way down, Izayoi abruptly asked in a low voice.

"……Ojou-sama, what do you think?"

"Eh?"

"I meant about the legend that Leticia became a Demon Lord who massacred her comrades."

The sudden topic of the conversation caused Asuka to freeze momentarily.

Even so, she said it clear and succinctly:

"I don't know how Leticia was in the past……but she's our Blond maid currently isn't she? Then how can we stand by and let someone else snatch her away."

"……Right. We sure cannot let it pass like that."

Seeing how Asuka was answering with such a fired up attitude, Izayoi smiled wryly.

---Just saying on the side, Izayoi had not asked that question **for that kind of answer**……But seeing how her answer was that dependable, he decided to take the optimistic approach and accept his comrade's energetic response as he gazed up upon the skies.

The swirling dark ominous clouds were still giving off low roars of thunder until now and they continued to surround the Ancient Citadel that floated in the skies.

Just when Izayoi was just thinking whether there's a chance for the two comrades, who had been caught to that place, to be safe at this moment in time---Asuka seemed like she was trying to lighten up their spirits as she stood with arms akimbo to suggest to Kuro Usagi and the others:

"When we get back to our rooms, let's get started on solving the mystery. To save Kasukabe and Leticia, we must unravel the mystery during the time of our ceasefire."

"YES! Although it is a tough one, but as the saying goes, two heads are better than one! With us four together to work on it, we will surely be able to figure it out!"

"Nn. To save Kasukabe-san and Leticia, we must get the mystery…"

"---No. If it's the part about the mystery, I've already solved it."

"……what?!"The elevator echoed with the same query that came from four different mouths.

Whether it was Asuka, Kuro Usagi who was beside her, Jin who stood in front or even Carol who was responsible for leading the way for them, question marks were visibly floating above their heads as they looked at Izayoi doubtfully.

"……Eh, Okyakusan? Then why did you tell Sala-sama just now something along the lines of 'Because of the lack in information, we must send a squad into the enemy's Citadel'?"

"Hm? Why would you understand it in that way? My meaning was [Although the information isn't much, but the riddle has been solved, so let's go clear the game!] and conveniently creating a squad to rescue the others as a side task."

And he did say [a squad that will infiltrate the Citadel of the enemy with the purpose to clear the game], but never did the rest expect that he meant it literally.

"But since you guys here have also mistaken it, then all is well too. If there's someone who suddenly appears and tries to enslave our fair haired maid without any prior knowledge, I will have to start a brawl with that fella. ~Oh my~ Fortune sure is on my side!"

Izayoi feinted ignorance as he turned his head away.

Carol blinked her eyes before becoming solemn.

"……That's unfortunate for I need to report to Sala-sama about this."

"50% off for all products?! You sure are generous aren't ya?"

"Oi, don't be like that ne~ Why would I betray you guys right? ♪"

Izayoi's threat caused Carol to break into cold sweat as she smiled and gave her reply quickly.

On one hand, Kuro Usagi and the others were seeing the true evilness in Izayoi but they also felt that he was very dependable and they could only look at each other while giving a wry laugh.

Interlude 2

Interlude 3

Part 1

All of a sudden, I heard a nostalgic voice calling for me.

Who knew when was the last time since someone had addressed me in that way.

It was still during the period of ceasefire and while drifting through dreams in a semi-conscious state, time seemed to flow back to aeons ago.

Enjoying the warm sunshine that came with the start of spring, I was woken up by the incessant calling of my nickname that irritated my ears.

“---Your Highness! Leti Highness! Really. Please do not sleep in this sort of place!”

With a jerk, I managed to free myself from the desire to sleep.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Carla-Jijochō who was dressed in a maid outfit, shaking my shoulders vigorously.

The barracks I was at is situated at the intersection between the Palace and the Outer Walls. While enraged roars, cheers, pitiful screams and basically a noisy bunch of noise could be heard coming from the Training grounds that were located just next to the barracks. Seems like the Knight-in-command is carrying out a Spartan-style cruel training programme.

It would seem that I had been lulled into sleep beside the windows by both the lively and comforting din that my comrades were making and the warmth of the Springtime Sunshine.

Ah. Sorry about that, Carla-Jijochō.

"What do you mean by 'Sorry about that'?! Really now. For a Hime-sama of the General to doze off in a barrack?! That's too unbecoming! Really too unbecoming!"

Carla-Jijochō stood with a hand on her hip and as she pressed the bridge of her spectacles, she shook her head in an exaggerated fashion.

Even if you say that, just take a look at the warm and radiant Sun of the springtime. Isn't it much stranger for us who are of a naturally nocturnal race to be awake at this time? We, vampires of Little Garden having some greed about bathing in the Sun that is a luxury only limited to the daytime and receiving the Gift from the sunlight---[A nice and comfortable nap], what's so wrong about that? Since it's the words of the Kyuketsuki Hime, it shouldn't be wrong. Just wait till I inherit the position as King and I shall amend the rules.

So in the meantime, Good Night, Carla-Jijochō Hu~…….

"You are not allowed to return to your dream world!"

Pak! Came the sound as Jijochō whacked me once with a feather duster. And that caused me to start my childish tantrum for real.

……No, I want to sleep. I definitely won't get up.

"What do you mean by 'No, I want to sleep'?! You're the symbol of us [Knights of Little Garden]! Possessing the title of [Dragon Knight], you're actually sleeping in this kind of place while drooling?! That's totally not what a role model should be doing!.....Heys! Really. Didn't you hear me, wake up right now!"

I displayed my persevering attitude to fight till the end while the veins started to pop on Carla-Jijochō's temples as she grew angrier by the moment.

Even so, I continued to persevere in lazing around. And veins continued to pop near Carla-Jijochō's temples till the point where she finally exploded with a chain of sounds from her finishing move *Pi Pak Piak Ding Ling Klunk Bunk Gulonk Buong Jing Jiang KaChung Ping Ping Pang Pang Swish Chi BABOOM* as she started to whack me.

……and what could that last sound be?

"That's a vocational secret of maids. A top notch maid must possess one or two finishing moves and must also master up to forty-eight or sometimes up to a hundred and eighty techniques as well as the trump card of staying out of sight. That's the minimum of requirements. As long as the master requests for it, from just the preparation of tea, cooking, washing the laundry, sweeping and dusting etc. , basic chores of housekeeping and caring for the vegetable gardens, helping with the change of clothes, all the above and other qualities like providing wisdom, the drawing up of strategies, and also to be prepared to do stuff like assassinations to duels and execute all tasks perfectly. And that's the true essence of being a maid."

Wow, maids sure are amazing!

"Of course." Carla-Jijochō didn't seem to be bragging when she said all those, but was just stating the facts in a brief manner. In fact, she's one of the warriors trusted for her strength in our kind and currently works as one of the strategists who drew up the plans before we fought against Demon Lords in games.

---Maids sure are frightening but deserving of respect. I should also work hard to achieve a higher goal.

The both of them walked pass the training grounds after coming out of the barracks and they were walking through the gardens that led to the City walls by cutting through it diagonally.

Just then, Carla-Jijochō seemed to have remembered something as she spoke up:

“Oh right. Your Highness. Regarding that matter, [Thousand Eyes] have already delivered their reply.”

That matter?

“Yes, that’s right. According to the letter, it says that they are willing to provide support regarding the new system to be set up across the whole of Little Garden’s Cities---The [Floor Master] System. Especially [White Night Demon Lord] and [Laplace Demon Lord], these two big cadres have generously offered their help. As expected, it sure is a treasure trove of talented individuals.”

……

“Yep. They are more cooperative than we thought. This must be the karma that has been accumulated from us, the entire Vampire Race who had many accomplishments since we took on the identity as the [Knights of Little Garden]. But the only problem is that [White Night Demon Lord] is a little unsuitable in her element and conduct, so she will have to convert to Buddhism before joining us in battle.”

……

“Oh my. You sure are a worrywart. Although there was a time when she had rampaged and caused trouble as a Demon Lord, it’s all in the past now and currently she hopes to use her powers as a benevolent Goddess. On the contrary, the bigger

problem is now from the opposition of that system. They are trying to push for the notion of battling our way into the upper echelons after becoming the [Overall Floor Master]---”

……

“---Yep. It’s just as what Your Highness says. The Fame and Wealth that we have accumulated will still be bounded by the laws of becoming old, frail and withered away and that day will come upon us some day. However, if the system were to be implemented smoothly, the honour and fame of us, the [Knights of Little Garden] having had the initiative to defend and maintain the peace, will surely continue to live on as legends and for generations to come……Of course, it’s precisely because of that, Demon Lords have teamed up with the opposition party and started to do some nasty plotting in the dark---“

……Is that so?

I see… that much time had already passed since then.

“---Even though that may be the case, as long as Leti Highness inherits the throne, we of the Vampire Race will surely welcome a prosperous age. I heard that the long-awaited wish of us Vampires--- the Sun’s Authority will also be used as a reward for our accomplishments. The morrow of us Vampires will be a bright one indeed♪”

Yep……that’s right.

“Hehe……Ah right. Leti Highness, your imouto has asked me to pass you this message of [I’m hosting a tea party at noon today, I hope that onee-sama will be able to join us], I’m guessing that the answer is an affirmative right?”

Of course. Is that even a question?--- but at the same time that I made that answer, my consciousness was gradually receding.

The memory of being wrapped by the warmth of the Springtime Sunshine and the gentle atmosphere of those times.

Standing from afar, I watched the figure that was myself as I reminisced about the many things of the past.

What karma is it that allows me to fall so deeply into this kind of dream world? I do not know. But if this were just a dream world, no one would blame me if I thoroughly enjoyed this moment of bliss right?

The world at peace and without much insecurities to boggle the mind.

And so I sank deeper into the dream world that was filled with bliss and comfort albeit being lazy and idle.

Part 2

---Ancient Vampire Citadel, Outer Walls

Sssh A gust of moist wind blew across the crumbling city while the skies surrounding the City were thickly covered with storm clouds that flickered with lightning.

Having heard the history of the Vampires from Garol, Yō nodded her head a few times, seeming to start thinking about it seriously with the look of one who was doing a meticulous sampling of food. At the end of his recount, Garol slapped his knee as he asked Yō:

“So how was it, Yō Ojou-chan? Were my words useful?”

“……Nn, Garol-san. Thank you.”

Yō expressed her thanks and Garol gave a wide smile in reply.

However, Ayesha who was sitting beside them was looking at the Geass Roll contents and having heard the story as well, she tilted her head quizzically as she spoke up:

“Why is it that I couldn’t get it, one bit?! What part of that story is related to the solving of the mystery? Isn’t the [Leader of the Revolution] a key phrase?”

“Nope, it doesn’t have any connection to that phrase…… In fact, the topic just now was **totally unrelated to the solving of the riddle.**”

“Hah?” Ayesha questioned in surprise.

Yō unfurled her Geass Roll before the others.

"As I've said earlier, I believe that the phrase [Revolution] may be there to mislead the Participants of that time and should have another meaning or way to explain it. What I wanted to confirm from the history was something much earlier than that. And that is whether this Sky Citadel was **[Something created from another world]** or not."

"……What does that mean?"

"It's in relation to the title of the game. For the direct translation of [SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT] is the Ecliptic route taken by the Sun---Hmm, How should I put it. In other words, this phrase refers to the man-made satellite's orbit that maintains a special angle of its route in accordance to the Sun."

"Eh? Did you say satellite?"

Jack's voice suddenly broke in with much excitement in his voice. Yō was also amazed by his reaction.

"……Jack–san also knows about satellites?"

"Hm……Yep. When I came over to Little Garden, it was already during the 1960s……No. Wait, that's not the point. The point should be what Kasukabe-san just mentioned. When you talked about satellites, was it this Citadel that you meant……"

"Nn. But calling it a [God-made Satellite] in Little Garden should be a more accurate description right? If the name of the game referred to the orbit that was in synch with the Sun's ecliptic path……then the whole game would have hints found from the connections between [Sun] and [Orbit]."

*Wow~*Jack exclaimed in admiration. “Yahoho…… Then the Vampire race might actually come from the far off future.”

“Nn. That’s what I think as well.”

After all, Little Garden was connected to many other timelines. The descendants of the Vampires being a little different would then be understandable.

If it were to be looked at from the reasons of [Due to environmental changes that led to Sunlight becoming a threat to their race] and or [The act of giving up on their world(Planet)], it would give people the impression that the Vampires of Little Garden were an existence that originated from the distant future .

Although Garol did not have any knowledge about satellites, Yō’s last line had sparked something in his mind.

“A game that revolves around the terms of [Sun] and [Orbit]……right? Then it means that, Yō ojou-chan, you have solved the phrase [Circle of Animals] to be [Zodiac]?”

“Zodiac?”

Ayesha and Kirino glanced at each other in puzzlement.

Jack turned his Pumpkin head towards them as he explained it to them:

“[Circle of Animals] is the alternate name of [Zodiac] or [Twelve Signs of the Zodiac].”

“Hm…[The Twelve Signs of the Zodiac]… is it the twelve constellations that includes Leo, Cancer and the others?”

"Yahoho, that's correct! The twelve constellations is the Ecliptic route that the Sun travels along with a shift of the constellation with every 30 degrees covered. It is a way to divide the skies by the celestial bodies---"

---Reaching that point, Jack's words suddenly stopped in mid-sentence.

Jack who was full of smiles when he was replying earlier was not in deep thought as he seemed to have caught onto something.

"Celestial bodies…Division? Could it be……"

"That's right. The third winning condition [Gather the broken fragments of the constellations, and bring the Circle of Animals to present to the throne.] the implied meaning should be [Gather Twelve constellations divided by the Circle of Animals to present to the throne.]……right?"

As Yō spoke her conjecture, the last portion of her words started to drift into the winds as she lowered her voice due to the lack of self-confidence. Perhaps she wasn't too sure about her own conjecture. But everyone around her had loudly drawn in a sharp intake of breath at the same time.

"Yahohoho…… GOOD! Kasukabe-san! That conjecture fits in with many of the key phrases!"

"Bu….But… I've not figured out what it meant by [Gather the constellations]……"

"No No! Even so, regarding the direction of our future actions from now on, your conjecture was really very helpful already! Let's hurry and get the other people to help as well!"

Garol slapped his knee as he gave a loud hearty laugh for with that, there finally was a ray of hope found for them all.

And so the search for the Zodiacs---a trace of anything that may relate to the Twelve constellations within the Ancient Citadel started for those who were trapped in the Sky Citadel.

Part 3

---[Underwood Underground Cavern] The underground floodgate of the Great Tree.

The group of [No Name]s had been led to the VIP room located beside the underground floodgate that was the pride of [Underwood] for their active role in the previous battles before the ceasefire and for the future role they may play in the war.

The passages that were created from the excavation of the Great Tree's interior extended downwards along the centre of the Great Tree in a spiralling fashion.

Didn't they say that this was a VIP room? It sure is troublesome to get there. Asuka couldn't help having that complaint forming in her heart, as she spoke:

"This passage seems to extend quite deep into the ground…Could it be that the room is situated at the interior of the Great Tree?"

"Yep, that's right! Okyakusan, I'm leading you to a VIP room that's constructed by the carving of a huge tree burl amongst the Tree Roots or Tree branches. And the one that I'm bringing you guys to right now is the most luxurious of them all, so please look forward to it yo♪"

Carol who was responsible for leading the way was happily leading them to the VIP room while waving her nicely bent tail.

Although it was a period of emergency, the few of them couldn't help being full of anticipation upon hearing that much praise given to the room they were assigned to. Asuka and Izayoi turned to look at each other and exchanged a smile.

Carol stopped before the VIP room---

"OK, see it for your own eyes then! This is our prided floodgate of the [Underwood]'s Gigantic Water Tree which stretches across the River! It's the best VIP room that allows you to enjoy the sight of two thousand or more water and tree sprites!"

With a sound of *Clack*, the door was pushed open. And with the wind that blew in from the VIP room windows, a scent of the river and a small group of faeries were blown in.

"Wa……!"

Although the faeries were so small that it was almost impossible to focus on their corporeal bodies, the faint glowing lights surrounding them were enough to make their presences known. The faeries were like fireflies that danced above the river surface, weaving right, left and around each other, causing the view of the Great Water Tree sprawling across the River to have an added touch of allure.

Using her hands to cup a little Faerie, Asuka asked Kuro Usagi:

"Are all of these little glowing balls faeries?"

"YES! Before Faeries have stronger spiritual powers, they are all of this miniature presences. Mel had gained her spirit level through the developing of land and those faeries that are reborn from death, except for those that did the same way as Ayesha, would look like this when they are born."

Kuro Usagi explained with much confidence in herself.

For Asuka who had always believed that Mel was the smallest in size, this was a very refreshing information to her.

Taking the time while the two of them were talking to move to the windows, Izayoi gazed upon the the mouth of the river where the Great [Underwood] Tree roots grew over. And as he watched that sparkling and glowing magnificent sight before him, an expression came over his face that could not be completely called joy but better described as wistful.

"……This is quite a problem, with such a beautiful waterside view, just by Shirayuki-hime alone, we aren't going to win."

"Eh?"

"It's about that… Remember the previous day when I went to find Shiroyasha to develop the water source? Well, that plan was actually--- to construct a shrine for Shirayuki-hime and develop waterways to make the view of the free lands look prosperous and resplendent."

"There…There's such a plan as well……?"

Having heard of the plan for the first time, Kuro Usagi was taken aback.

The surroundings of the Outer Gate, especially the development of the free lands and its look of prosperity would often reflect on the level of the [Region Master].

Izayoi had actually planned to construct a shrine of worship for Shirayuki-hime and to gradually expand from there to develop the plans of a Water City within the Outer Gate 2105380.

Hearing his explanation, the expression of Kuro Usagi and the others had turned from wonder to one that was difficult to describe.

"Nn…… When you say it like that, it sure is a strong opponent. [Underwood] is one of the handful of water cities that can be found in the Lower levels. But to try to catch up to it from scratch……"

"That's too difficult. And from the perspective of the soil composition, there's also quite a large difference between East Side and South Side right?"

"Ye…Yes. The South Side's climate is more suitable for the growth of plants and the soils is much more fertile. Even if one wasn't a Eudemon, they would still be able to live comfortably here."

"North Side's city is always in an autumn-like appearance due to the huge Kekkai surrounding it, but the other undeveloped parts and areas apart from its city seem to be frozen grounds. To make up for the shortage of natural endowment, the Communities have to teach one another and share their knowledge while working hard to create or summon more Gifts. And precisely because of how the Communities in the North are equipped with a higher level of knowledge, it gave them the ability to continue their development."

When compared to those two, the East side was……Thinking about that, everyone fell silent.

The climate at East Side and the soil composition wasn't too shabby.

The structures and decorations may be a little old fashioned but it did not bring much inconvenience.

But to point out an area that it was best at…… it would probably be its security and only that.

"……But [Underwood] had also just recently revived to the state we see it today after being destroyed by a Demon Lord. Since the conditions are similar to be viable as our opponents, the problem isn't about the advantages they have or do not have but the fact that within ten years, we must show them that we can do much better."

Izayoi gave a harrumph as he made the announcement.

No matter how far that target might be, for him to take back his words would surely hurt his pride. Izayoi gazed at the cavern before him once more with eyes that seemed to be declaring war upon it.

The dazzling glows of the faerie clusters could be seen darting around as they danced in the air above the prided [Underwood] Underground Great Tree Water Gates.

This dream like spectacle before them would become a topic to be examined by the [No Name]s in the future, though this would be something that they would find to be difficult to solve.

Asuka sat on the sofa in the VIP room, sighing as she gave her conclusion:

"Discussing it further would be a waste of time. Regarding that topic, let's think about it when we have more time to mull over it. Our priority now should still be to draw up the battle plans to rescue Kasukabe-san and Leticia."

"Nn……You're right! The solving of the riddle can be left to Izayoi-san, so let's start the discussion on our strategies now!"

Kuro Usagi switched to a happy mood as she gave her reply with alacrity.

Izayoi and Jin sat down as well as they joined the discussion.

"Well then, a realistic problem that we have now is the fact that we do not have any means to rush to that Citadel. Regarding this point, we can only find the [Draco Greif] Alliance to ask for help but…… ochibi-sama, do you have any other ideas?"

"Well, it's not really an idea but I guess we can ask Gry-san for the favour. After all, he did see Yō-san as his friend and should be willing to lend a hand to our cause of saving her in this time of emergency."

"Oh? You mean that Gryphon, the one whom we met at the [Thousand Eyes] Branch store?"

" YES! Gry-san is a very friendly and understanding gentleman!"

Hm Izayoi folded his arms as he started to ponder about the matter. If the Gryphon was willing to become his means to get to the Citadel, he had no complaint about that arrangement. In fact, that could be counted as solving the problem.

"That's good, then I will be leaving it to Kuro Usagi to handle it. Then next up is the formation of the group to wait for the orders and the invasion party. The group that is to wait for the orders and engage the Titans when they attack will be led by ochibi-sama and Percher while the invasion party is by me---"

"---and I will be going as well."

Asuka interrupted Izayoi's words.

Izayoi lifted his head in surprise but Asuka ignored his reaction as she continued:

"Kuro Usagi is unable to join the game. So she must stay to deal with the Titans. Jin and Percher have the strength to battle with the Titans and that leaves me and Izayoi-

san to attempt the invasion by flight……that should be the best way to assign the roles right?"

Asuka stared Izayoi seriously in the eyes and corresponding to her stare, Izayoi made his expressions unreadable as he started to observe Asuka.

And before he could even give a reply, Asuka added:

"About how Izayoi-san always chooses to give the instructions for me to be far from the danger zone in large scale Games……it's not that I've not noticed that move."

"……"

Izayoi only squinted his eyes but did not deny it.

Because more than half of what Asuka had said was the truth.

When it was the battle with [Perseus], Asuka's strength was clearly lacking and knowing that point, she had accepted the task assigned to her.

However, during the time of [Black Death Demon Lord]'s battle, though it wasn't a direct order, he did make it known that he wanted Kudou Asuka and Kasukabe Yō who were at the front lines to maintain a distance away from the Demon Lord.

For Izayoi had judged that at the scene then, the only candidate who could go on par with the Demon Lord wasn't Asuka and not Yō as well……it was Leticia alone.

"In the end, your decision might have been right. Who knows? Maybe Izayoi-san should be left to assign the roles this time as well…… but this time, there's no news of Kasukabe-san and Leticia. Though it might be reckless, we must still forcefully break through into the enemy's encampment. Or else the people that we want to rescue might not be able to come out safely."

"So, please let me go with you."

For Asuka who had a high amount of pride to say such a thing, it was clear that she was serious about it.

Hence Izayoi did not give his answer simply, but continued to ponder over it with his arms folded across his chest. And after a while, he suddenly posed a question to Asuka:

"……Why does Oujo-sama want to come along with me? For Kasukabe and Leticia?"

"Yep."

"Really? But I don't want to bring you along."

Izayoi immediately gave his reply. His sharp and cold tone did not leave a single shred of ground as he rejected Asuka outright and caused the atmosphere of the place to suddenly drop to the freezing point.

Compared to the anger of being rejected, Asuka was experiencing a numbness in her body due to her anxiety.

Izayoi leaned forward to observe Asuka's expression as he calmly gave his advice:

"Oujo-sama, I do admire that determination in you. But I still do not want to bring you along. For in the case where we meet with some trouble, with a Demon Lord---or perhaps an unknown threat that's of an equal calibre, Oujo-sama will be finished on the spot."

"N…No way that's going to happen. I…I've also faced [Black Death Demon Lord] before……"

"That was just the result of coincidence. If Oujo-sama were to fight Percher in a proper duel, there's no odds on your end at all."

"……What?!"

The unexpectedly blunt reply caused Asuka's retort to be trapped in her mouth. Clearly, Asuka had not expected Izayoi to reject her with such a finality in his voice.

Izayoi stood up and scratched his head as a troubled look came over his face.

"But, I can also understand the direction where Oujo-sama is coming from and the determination and feelings that back it. If it were me seeing my own people being made a of fool in such a manner, I would also be unable to stay quiet about it. I would surely want to exact my revenge on those guys……but if Oujo-sama were to be with me, my actions might get restricted during the critical moments and I would rather try to avoid that situation."

"……"

Hearing how Izayoi described her to be [A Bother] in a roundabout manner, Asuka could only grind her teeth for she was clear that her Gift was unsuitable for search missions. However aside from that point, she still wanted to play a part in helping Kasukabe and Leticia.

Not knowing how to reply to that, Asuka could only lower her head and it was then that Izayoi's lips parted into a grin.

"But, if Oujo-sama does possess the strength to defeat Percher, it will be a different matter altogether."

"……Eh?"

"There's still a lot of unstable factors between the new combination of ochibi-sama and Percher in battles. There's no saying that things will always progress smoothly for them on the battlefield every time either. So with that in mind, allowing them to gain some experience from fighting Deen whom we know is the natural opposite to their powers, isn't a bad idea too."

Izayoi glanced at Asuka with a smile at his lips.

Asuka had also caught on to the implied meaning as she replied:

"In other words, you want me, alone……to battle against the combination of Jin-chan and Percher?"

"Yep. As long as Oujo-sama wins one of the bouts, I will bring you along."

Izayoi nodded his head as he glared at Asuka challengingly.

If you want to demand for something, you must show your strength first. That was Izayoi's letter of challenge.

Asuka also took on a [That's how I would want it] attitude as she rested a hand on her hip while pointing at Izayoi.

"Great! I couldn't have asked for more! I will show Izayoi-san that you are wrong."

"Nn. Do your best then."

---That is if you really can win……Izayoi softly muttered under his breath.

While Jin was stumped by the schedule that was going off topic, he still lightly clenched his fist to give himself some encouragement.

Part 4

---Ancient Vampire Citadel, Outer walls

At the centre of the wind eroded ruins, the Pumpkin head that gave a cheery call---Jack-O'-Lantern stood before the children, who had been captured and brought to this Citadel, and called for their eyes to be upon him. Amongst the children were Beastmen, Dryads, Naiads, and many others, who comprised of mainly children who had been born locally in [Underwood].

What were they trying to do by gathering at the centre of the ruins? Yō and Garol sat on the rubble as they quietly watched the procession although they were sceptical about Jack's weird behaviour.

"That pumpkin head……What's he going to do?"

"I don't know. But he said that he hoped for the children to be able to help us happily. I think it shouldn't be something bad."

"It would be good if that were true~"Garol looked on with a mixture of doubt and trust in his voice.

At that moment, Jack was taking out an umbrella and raising it before the children.

"Yahoho! Good~Everyone focus here yo! This is a magical umbrella crafted by my friend! It's a masterpiece crafted by the hands of the famous sleep demon Ole Lukø Senior."

Jack laughed cheerily as Ayesha started to twirl the umbrella that she took from his hands.

Upon hearing the name of Ole Lukø, a look of surprise crept over Garol's expression.

"OiOi……The umbrella of Ole Lukø?"

"You've heard of it?"

"O…..Hm I've only heard of the name before. According to the tales told about it, it is a magical umbrella that allows one to enter various types of dream worlds……but how did that kind of treasure fall into that Pumpkin Head's hands?"

*Hm*Garol folded his arms as he tilted his head, puzzled.

---But what the both of them did not know about was that Ole Lukø was a Sleep demon that appeared as a youth in his prime that roamed near Denmark.

Ole Lukø would wear a rainbow coat and place one of the two magical umbrellas at the side of the pillow of the sleeping children.

If the child was good, he would place an umbrella that would give them good dreams.

If the child was naughty, he would place an umbrella that would give them bad dreams.

Jack spread his arms and bobbled his Pumpkin head as he announced:

"Yahoho! As long as everyone helps to gather the clues in the Outer walls, I will present this Dream umbrella made by Ole Lukø Senior to you guys!"

"HmHm~This time we are sure giving away a huge present ne~!"

Ayesha parted her lips as she smiled, showing her sharp incisors.

The downcast expressions of the children had immediately brightened up at the announcement.

And one of them had raised a hand to pose a question to Jack:

“Excuse me…… Jack-san. Can this umbrella induce the dream that we want to dream?”

“Yahoho? Nn! Although it can be described in that way……but if it isn’t bothersome, may I know what kind of dream you wish for?”

Jack tilted his Pumpkin head as he asked.

The child who raised her hand---Most likely a Naiad teenager answered coyly in a hesitant manner:

“I want……to dream a dream of our flag flying high in [Underwood].”

“……?”

“Currently, [Underwood] has come under the protection of the [Draco Greif] Alliance, so the flag has been kept in our treasury……We had originally planned to fly our flag once more after the Harvest Festival has been successfully hosted……but now the Harvest Festival is ruined……”

“So even if it’s just a dream, I hope to see the sight of the flag being flown from the top of [Underwood].” The teenage girl shyly ended it off at that and many other children had nodded their heads in agreement.

Jack was momentarily stumped and his reaction was off by a beat.

Garol had also turned away his face to hide his pained expression.

Whereas Yō only looked on at the children’s faces with a sincere attitude.

"……Garol-san. For these children, the flag seems to be a very important thing to them right?"

"Nn. All of the children in Little Garden's Cities have been growing up while looking up to their flag. And the feelings of not allowing their flag to be humiliated is deeply entrenched into them from young, so they know that every action that they take must be one that does no harm to their flag……For these children, the Harvest Festival can be counted as an important ritual that decides their futures."

But, this important ritual was destroyed.

And it was all due to the Demon Lord and the Titan tribe---and a few other people behind the scenes who were cruel and unfeeling about these feelings when they made their moves.

"……Is that so?"

Yō lightly replied as she continued to look at the children.

Looking through all the faces of the children, Jack nodded his head cheerily as he replied:

"……Yahoho! That's right, of course you can dream that. But if you win by cheating, that would be pointless yo~. This umbrella is one that will give sweet dreams to good children and bad dreams to naughty ones. Children who win by cheating will have a bad dream of scary pumpkins waiting for you oh~"

As Jack snapped his finger, the candle holders and lantern-carrying dolls sprung up at once.

Upon the delighted screams and shouts of the children, Garol squinted his eyes at them.

And Yō was reminded of Gry's words on the day of their arrival at the Harvest Festival plaza.

[We hope to let the North and East Side to know of the news of [Underwood]'s revival---]

The 'him' who had said those words had also brought her and the others along for a tour of the place in high spirits.

The time that was spent when they had first arrived for the Harvest Festival was really interesting.

Thinking of the residents who were full of energy and the many activities that were scheduled to be hosted, one would be abound with the excited feelings in anticipation for the events.

Be it the finding of the saplings and seeds for the revival of the [No Name]s, or the choosing of the local produce for presents to the children of their Community…… those were all experiences that were new to Yō.

The Harvest festival that was entrusted with the feelings of all the Participants, Host and the residents who have their hearts tied to this piece of homeland---had been completely ruined by the cold and heartless enemy.

In addition to that, they had also used an underhanded evil method of using Leticia to do their nasty job without having to dirty their hands.

"……This method sure is distasteful."

Yō muttered it sub-consciously and was also taken aback by her own words for she did not expect herself to say such a thing.

But it was precisely due to speaking her thoughts out unconsciously, it clearly showed where her heart stood on the matter.

Yō stood up abruptly and stopped short before Garol.

“Garol-san. Garol-san said that you’ve fought Demon Lords beside Draco Greif previously…… Could you be a [Floor Master] as well?”

“Hahaha, how can that be? The [Floor Master] was that guy, Draco Greif. I’m only one of his strategists. Information on the Vampires and the [Overall Floor Master] is all bits and pieces that I’ve picked up on the sly from working by his side.”

Although his choice of words were very humble, they still seem to contain a bit of pride from his attitude.

But for Yō herself, that was more than enough.

“Garol-san is a learned man. So I hope that you will teach me……the techniques to fight against Demon Lords in battles and the necessary knowledge for the cause.”

For the future encounters that she might have with Demon Lords from today onwards. Looking at Yō’s serious eyes, Garol had widened his eyes in surprise but in the next moment, he had stared back at Yō as he switched back to his serious expression.

“……no, that won’t do.”

“Eh?”

"I mean that your line of thought won't do any good……Listen up, Yō ojou-chan. The thought of [Fighting against Demon Lords] in itself is a mistake. When it comes to the basic rules about surviving in a Demon Lord game to achieve victory, you should be thinking along the lines of [How to avoid facing the Demon Lord in battle] as the premise."

Yō widened her eyes in surprise. And Garol leaned closer as he continued:

"The following that I shall tell you about will be the common knowledge about Little Garden's rules, so perk up your ears to listen up closely."

"O…Okay."

"Firstly, a Demon Lord's game will always have two or more conditions to clear the game or conditions to end the game. And these two types are--- [Defeating the Demon Lord to clear the game] and [Rendering the Demon Lord powerless to clear the game].

---as long as there isn't a set time or written rule of meeting a certain amount of the winning conditions, it would count as the Participant's win as long as they clear even one of the conditions. When three or more winning conditions are given for the Game when it starts, the Demon Lord can add a section of Punishment that may be advantageous to their side of the Game, or even to hide some of the winning conditions. For with an increase in the winning conditions, it also increases the advantage for the Participants……do you follow me?"

"Nn."

Yō nodded her head as she could follow his words. The current game itself was a very good example of that.

Although it also depends on the spirit level of the Demon Lord, what Garol wanted to say was that the [Number of winning conditions for the Participants], the [Number of winning conditions for the Host] and the [Number of Punishments] had their relationship in a specific ratio.

“And that is what I meant when I mentioned about [How to avoid facing the Demon Lord in battle] earlier in the conversation. Having a direct confrontation with the Demon Lord is only the last resort. The famous Demon Lords are mostly of the Strongest Class---and sometimes are true Demigods who can construct their own Worlds. After all, the Demon Lords of the Mid to lower levels are all of the level of Great Demons or even God class. Only fools or rookies will want to try and solve the problem with a direct confrontation.”

“……oh.”

Yō seemed a little deflated as she nodded her head.

---It was just as Garol had said. To have a direct confrontation with a Demon Lord and hope to win was an idea that did not fit in with common sense. After all, Demon Lords tend to possess Gifts that were of the highest tier and were incontestable in the Gift’s type while some of them also possessed the power to endow Gifts upon others.

To shatter that sort of enormous Spirit level, just depending on a normal Gift wouldn’t be of much use.

And with that new understanding, Yō was still uneasy about it as she said softly:

"But, Garol-san having followed by the side of the [Floor Master] should have experienced and survived many Demon Lord Games till date. Even if it's a little of those experiences, could I ask of you to share it with me?"

Yō continued to press the matter and it was very out of her character to be so persistent.

"Uu……About that……it might just be okay with giving you some pointers……"

"Please…" Yō moved closer as she continued her cornering.

And at last, Garol finally gave in as he raised both his hands to indicate his surrender.

"I got it, I got it already……Although I don't know if it will be of much use, but I will still teach you all that I know."

"……Really?"

"Nn…… But Yō ojou-chan, I have to tell you first that there is no fixed method in the strategies of battling a Demon Lord's game. And that is something that the Demon Lords themselves are very mindful about as well. In other words, all the strategies I've used in the past are all old battle plans that are outdated. It might even be just a waste of effort for me to recount them……"

"No. Even so, it's okay. Because I reckon that I must start from the step of [Understanding] to be able to get a better grasp on other tougher situations."

Understanding Little Garden, Understanding Demon Lords and Understanding the people of this world.

Garol did not reject any further but parted his lips in a cheerful smile as he agreed to Yō's request.

At the same time, Jack and Ayesha had also seemed to have explained the task to the children.

The total number of people trapped by the huge dragon in this place was fifty four.

And so they started their search in the Ancient Abandoned Vampire Citadel that was covered with clouds and rumbling thunder.

Interlude 4

Part 1

---Plateau upstream of [Underwood]'s River

The next day, Sala flapped her Wings of Flame as she flew towards the upstream portion of the river's course.

And below her was the Titan tribe encampment.

The plateau was clear of obstacles and that gave them a clear view for miles.

Perhaps being afraid of our counterattack caused them to set up their camp here. But at the same time that she thought of that, Sala tilted her head in puzzlement.

[For them to retreat to such a distance away on the Plateau…… are they planning to let off on the attacks on Underwood?]

Sala lifted her head to look towards [Underwood] which could be seen standing out in the distance from where she was.

Though the Great Tree could be seen even at such a distance away from it, it should take a while at least to get this army to reach its location. Although the Titans might be able to cover the distance with their great strides, they wouldn't want to waste their energy on the run before the invasion.

[The Titan tribe had also been badly hit by the huge dragon and since they have already obtained [The Death Eye of Balor], now should be the best time for them to beat their retreat……]

But if it were a retreat, it was way too close for comfort. In fact, this distance was way too strange.

After all, there was still the Demon Lord Citadel and huge dragon that were overhead waiting for the re-commencement of the game. And with the Titans at a distance where the Great Tree stood visible to them, the possibility of them joining the fray was high.

In terms of the distance, to invade would be much too far but to retreat, it was much too near.

If the aim of the enemy was to make it difficult to determine, then this would be the most ideal location.

[Hm……Oh well, I guess I'll just have to do preparations for both sides then.]

Turning her back to the Titans, Sala returned to [Underwood].

On her way back to her room after touching down on the Great Tree's branch, Sala met Carol who was waving her nicely bent tail while walking from the opposite direction.

"Ah, Sala-sama! When did you return?"

"I just did. There are no changes in the situation for [Underwood] right?"

"Yes, there's no problem. I just came back from the discussion with the other leaders about what we have planned for our actions tomorrow but there aren't many that are willing to make the trip to the Demon Lord stronghold."

"Is that so?" Sala replied with some of her fatigue seeping into her words.

It wasn't that her comrades of the Alliance were scaredy-cats, but it was mainly due to the winged main force being in the midst of recuperation after having sustained injuries to their wings during the sudden attack from the huge dragon. The situation

was so bad that they even had to call in members who usually worked as supportive roles to the frontlines as a solution to the shortage.

“After all, there’s also the need to assemble a force to defend against the Titans and I guess everyone thinks that they should throw their precious main force towards the defensive measures……Oh, right, I almost forgot to mention it. It seems that there are people outside of our Alliance that are willing to lend a hand! And these people who are preparing to defeat the Demon Lord are led by Gry-sama of [Thousand Eyes]!”

“Oh……It’s the Gryphon that was born in [Underwood] right? I heard that he’s quite young. But as expected of a Eudemon that stands for the meaning of courage.”

Sala gave a bitter smile as she looked at the flag of the [Draco Greif] Alliance that was carved upon her bangle.

Feeling a little uneasy as she noticed that dark expression on Sala’s face, Carol decided to continue with a smile:

“Ah, there’s more! The huge bath house that was closed for renovations has been completed. May Sala-sama please relax yourself in there for a while!”

“No thanks. Now isn’t the time for me to do that sort of stuff.……”

“Heiki Heiki! You have been drowning yourself in work recently … you should also reward yourself once in a while as well you know……UuWaah!”

At that moment, the Great Tree had started to shake violently and it was an unnatural tremor.

Widening her eyes in surprise due to this sudden turn of events, Sala immediately turned her eyes towards the direction of the Titan encampment.

“That tremor just now……! Could it be that the Titan tribes are……”

“No No No, You’ve gotten it wrong! The tremor is due to the [No Name]s who are……Uu…Waaaahah!”

The tree branch of the Great Tree shook violently once more and Carol who couldn’t keep her balance had fallen on her butt.

Sala stretched her hand to help her up as she asked in astonishment:

“Did you say that it was caused by the [No Name]s…?”

“Nn…yes. If you are free, you can have a look for yourself. At the same time, I will also get the bath prepared for you.”

Sala tilted her head quizzically but she nodded her head. The bath could be put aside for now but the tremors just now were worrying. As the representative, she had the responsibility to find out the cause of those tremors.

Bidding Carol farewell at that point, Sala started to make her strides towards the Cavern that was located at the underground [Underwood] water gate.

Part 2

---[Underwood Underground Cavern], The floodgate under the Great Tree.

“---DEEEEEEEEeeeEEEEEEEEEEN!”

The Red Metal Doll that was swinging its arms and legs while roaring---Deen was agitated as it relentlessly pursued the small white figure that was flitting around and constantly out of its grasp.

On the other hand, Percher was hovering above the river’s surface as she gave a weary sigh.

“……Do you still want to continue? I’m getting bored by this already.”

“……Uu, horrid!...DEEN! Flatten her in one strike!”

Asuka, who was standing on Deen’s shoulder, yelled impatiently.

The Red Metal Doll raised its huge right arm like a cannon before letting it fly with an enraged roar.

“DEEEEEEEEeeeEEEEEEEEEEN!”

The right arm made from the stretchable metal [Rare Sacred Iron]「神珍铁」 had shot out at a speed of a cannonball towards Percher.

But Percher whipped up a black whirlwind within a moment and leisurely dodged the attack as she spun aside. Although the huge left arm had also extended towards her, the act was still futile.

Judging that Deen’s arms were stretched to their maximum, Percher then started to sprint along the metal arm and closed in on Asuka.

“Okay, that’s it. The end.”

このままじゃ死んじゃうわよ、赤い人？
黒ウサギ殿、何だコレは？
……
……、
ペスト
ジン
飛鳥（あすか）

Bam! Being unable to resist the impact, Asuka was sent flying into the air before...

*Splash---!*The water of the river sprayed up as Asuka fell into it. The faerie clusters had also dispersed like mist as they flee from the scene. Asuka was now hugging a boulder that jutted from the middle of the river as she kept her body afloat.

Sitting on Deen's shoulder, Percher used a bored expression to look down upon Asuka who was in the river.

"It's enough right? If I were to repeat the same thing for the fifth time, I would really be tired of it."

"……Ugh……!"

To prevent herself from being washed away by the river's flow, Asuka could only cling tighter to the boulder for dear life.

It was just as Percher said. This was already the fourth result of their contest and it had also been the same with the previous ones: with Asuka falling from Deen as the last act that signed her defeat.

Deen with its lower half immersed in the river reached out a huge palm towards its master as it rescued her from the waters.

"……thanks, Deen."

"DeN."

Deen gave a curt reply. Although it's voice was a monotone, it seemed to lack the usual domineering spirit(haki).

Percher lightly floated to Asuka's side before asking with a really annoying smile on her face:

"So, what do you want to do now? Wanna continue? If you want to continue, it will just be similar to me bullying you, but it isn't as if I'm unwilling."

"……No. It's enough."

"Oh, really?" Percher continued to have that smile on her face as she coldly dropped that line before flying off to the side.

Perhaps it was the victory over Asuka, who had a strong will and confidence in herself, that caused Percher to be in an especially good mood. And as she lightly skipped her way back to Jin's side, what welcomed her was far from praises.

"Percher, this contest is supposed to iron out the problem between the clash of two opposing elements. You shouldn't have directly aimed for Asuka but fight with Deen itself."

"Well, that was my original intention too……But that little red girl was full of openings and I just couldn't resist that urge. It was just begging for me to take advantage of it when she's in that state."

Saying that, Percher sat herself at the river's bank and started to kick at the water with her feet to send the water spray into the river with the sound of splashing water.

Although the words that came from her mouth were full of arrogance, but she did catch on quickly about Izayoi's real intention when she first heard of the contest.

"I had also wanted to have a contest with her for real……but that little red girl is basically just a normal human. In fact, it's just fortunate for that sort of person to successfully survive in my Game and that sure is something I must admit to be quite a feat."

Percher had a leisurely smile on her face as she made her dig at Asuka.

That's right---It was just as Percher had pointed out, Asuka's body was just that of a normal human being. Even after obtaining a strong and big subordinate like Deen, it did nothing to wipe out that flaw.

If it were just another normal enemy, it would be a different matter but when matched up with a higher classed Demon or a Eudemon that had strong physical abilities, Asuka would be unable to protect herself.

"……but I have something that I agree too. The Red Metal Doll's Gift that has been strengthened by her is definitely a threat. In terms of strength, durability, the godly speed and the smoothness of its stretching ability, if it were to be in a completely powered up mode, it would definitely be tough enough to make my former God class form to be unable to do a thing about it. And that's something that I must admit too."

Her Black winds of Death hadn't been effective on that Red Metal Doll when she was a God class spirit. And when it was given support from Asuka, Deen's strength would increase tremendously.

That was something that even Percher would admit.

"But, the main point is that the master is seriously too weak. No matter how strong a puppet she may have, lacking any means for self-defense, the puppeteer isn't the least bit frightening. Let's not even start on the talk of Demon Lords. Just matching her with any of the Eudemons found in this area will already be enough to spell her defeat."

Percher glanced at Asuka while smiling as she said those words that were dripping with sarcasm. The reason for Percher being so blunt with her provocative words

would most probably be due to her being spiteful of the fact that Asuka had been the one who landed the finishing blow to her in the previous Game.

Jin frowned as he seemed ready to admonish Percher who couldn't seem to control her tongue.

"Percher, that's too much. Could you mind that tone slightly---?"

"Nope, I don't wanna. Anyways, isn't it that freak's intention to make her recognize her own shortfalls? Then I've just completed my job with a hundred and twenty percent of my effort. If you want me to spend more thought on how to comfort her, that would be too unreasonable already isn't it?"

Percher continued to smile serenely as she cast her gaze towards the window of the main VIP room.

Just then, Sala had also arrived at the main VIP quarters to have a look.

Kuro Usagi who watched the progress of the battle situation below from the main VIP quarters had also acknowledged Sala's arrival politely with her eyes, but a bitter smile hung on her lips.

"Sala-sama…… um…you saw?"

"Nn. I had come to check out the cause of the tremors……and I see…you guys are doing a small test of strength?"

"YES. In preparation for the battle tomorrow, we have borrowed the Underground Cavern for today."

Sala gave an *Mhn* as she looked down once more. But what she was focusing on wasn't on Percher or Asuka but the footprints that were left behind by Deen that did not seem to match the owner.

[That being a metal doll created from the Rare Sacred Iron…… a metal Titan that can stretch as it please. But even if it were to be created from the Rare Sacred Iron, the total weight shouldn't be any different……could it be the effect from that girl's Gift?]

Taking note of the depth of those footprints left behind by Deen, Sala sank into deep thought.

On the other hand, Asuka was standing with her head down at the side of the river, thoroughly drenched and dripping but not moving an inch.

"Asuka-san……"

Kuro Usagi called her name worriedly, albeit in a soft murmur.

Even after the consecutive belittling comments, Asuka did not even return a violent retort nor did she meet Percher's eyes.

Although this was an expected result, but this was much too cruel a defeat for Asuka who was a girl with much self-confidence and would surely be a huge wound to her pride. Although not telling Jin about the intention of the fight might be her bad in the first place, but now that it had come to this, Kuro Usagi could only regret about having allowed Percher and not herself to fight Asuka.

To completely shatter the determination that Asuka had for the rescuing of Yō and the others in the enemy camp, it really was too cruel.

Just as Kuro Usagi was wracking her brains for a solution to repair the situation……Izayoi's figure could be seen taking large strides in the Cavern below and entering Kuro Usagi's field of vision.

And there were huge pails in each of his hands.

Kuro Usagi immediately felt a chill creep up her back.

"Iza, Izayoi-san…… what is he planning to do?"

"Who knows? He seems to be carrying pails to me."

The two who continued to watch him tilted their heads in puzzlement. What Izayoi held in his hands were metal containers that were rounded and protruding at the right places. In other words, they were just normal pails that could not be mistaken for any other thing.

Izayoi was only carrying those pails while walking along the bank of the river…… but watching Izayoi's movements, Kuro Usagi's rabbit ears had pressed themselves flat on her head, seeming to have sensed something bad approaching.

"What… What could he be doing……Why does Kuro Usagi feel such a bad omen!"

Kuro Usagi backed away from the windows.

Whereas Izayoi sat at the river bank to fill up the metal pails with water. Then heaving up the full buckets of river water, he then started towards Percher and Jin's direction with his long strides again.

"---Oh my it SLIPPPEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEED!"

Splash! Izayoi used his full strength to splash the water on Percher and Jin.

And conveniently sent another pail towards Kuro Usagi's direction as well.

"---Why…I say why must you do that AHHHHHHH~!"

Kuro Usagi managed to dodge the pail of water that was thrown from below, albeit barely. But it would seem that Kuro Usagi's instincts towards danger had risen quite a bit after experiencing lots of teasings of this sort.

Fufu Though still having cold sweat from the near miss experience, Kuro Usagi triumphantly took a peek below.

But on the other hand, Sala who had been standing beside her was in a daze as she was totally drenched. Having been pampered as the successor of the Community as she grew up, this should be the first time that she experienced a [Splash Water Attack from someone on the first meeting] or something along those lines. As for the evidence? That should be clear enough from how her thoughts and body had tensed up.

Just to mention it on the side, Jin and Percher who had gotten the impact at the short distance were sent flying back before falling somewhere around three metres or so from their original locations.

As the victors of the contest, both of them sure didn't expect to be splashed by water. And Percher stood up unsteadily while staring at Izayoi in anger.

"……what's that for…?"

"Well, if my hand slips, there's really nothing I can do, right?"

Izayoi had a smile plastered across his face that seemed to say that was something that he wouldn't want to explain further while giving a thumbs up at them.

However, those eyes of his were cold and lacked the slightest hint of humor in them. And Jin being one of those who was in line with a smiling Izayoi's stare couldn't help it as his body tensed up immediately.

If one were to translate the expression that he had, it should be something like [You have gone too far, baka! At least open your eyes to observe the current atmosphere, you brainless polka dotted loli].

Under the pressure of Izayoi's stare that left no room for discussion, Percher turned her face away as she puffed up her cheeks, seeming to throw a tantrum.

And taking the opportunity, Izayoi grabbed the both of them.

"Wa…Wait a moment, what are you trying to do…?!"

"Since my hand slipped, there's no choice is there? I guess I will take responsibility and carry you guys into the bath!"

"Bath……?"

Percher's face instantly grew pale and started to contort.

While heaving the two of them, Izayoi turned to fix his gaze on Asuka who was watching the sudden turn of events unfold before her in a daze.

"……Oi, Ojou-sama."

"Wha….What now?"

"What do you mean by what now? If you continue to stand there being drenched to that extent, there's no need to question whether you will catch a cold or not so anyways what's next is to proceed to the bath but basically any rejection to the offer will be rejected so all in all I'm just going to heave you like the other two and you have no grounds to complain do you get that? Okay, so let's go!"

"Eh? Ah?"

A bewildered Asuka tilted her head as she too was heaved up onto Izayoi's shoulder.

Izayoi who carried the two children and Asuka had continued to make his great strides out of the cavern.

Kuro Usagi and Sala who had watched the whole process, from the VIP quarters, were left in a daze as they sent off Izayoi with their eyes while following the unique path that he chose for himself. Seeming to have recalled something, Sala who had been dazed and drenched turned to ask Kuro Usagi:

"……Kuro Usagi."

"Ye…Yes."

Sala wrung her wet hair while pointing at the retreating figure of Izayoi.

"…… WHAT is that?"

"……"

Kuro Usagi suppressed the urge to reply with "Yep, what is that?", after all it wasn't right to do so.

If an explanation had to be given, she could only answer that it's a [Problem child] ……but with that kind of explanation, Sala wouldn't be satisfied by that would she?

After all, it was evident from just the observation of Izayoi splashing water to attack everyone earlier and that moment was enough for one to tell that much.

The Great Tree VIP quarters was silent except for the sound of dripping water that fell to the floorings, and the atmosphere was filled with a profound air.

Just then, Carol's energetic shout could be heard coming from the doorway and that ended the awkward moment.

"Sala-sama! The preparations for the bath has been completed!"

"Hm? Oh, okay, I will be making my way there now."

Glancing at her drenched self, Sala then gave a wry smile.

Looks like she did need a good bath.

Kuro Usagi dropped her rabbit ears dejectedly as she apologized for her comrades' rudeness.

"UuUu……Kuro Usagi apologize on the behalf on her comrade's rudeness---"

"Sure it was. But if we continue to be here, I might just catch a cold at the worst timing. And since due to you guys forcing me to take a bath…… I guess I will forgive this matter on the behalf of Kuro Usagi, you to scrub my back as a way to make amends."

Sala may have made it sound arrogant, but a playful smile tugged at her lips.

Kuro Usagi also brightened up immediately as she followed Sala to the bathhouse.

Part 3

---[Underwood] Leafy Emerald Green Hall, Large bathhouse.

The large bathhouse was located at the western side of the Great tree and similar to the other rooms, it was made from a gorged out tree burl. And with just one glance, one could already see the difference between it and the normal type of bathhouses.

As this hall was made from the naturally forming burl on the tree branch, without any extra materials brought in from the outside. The patterns on the wall were all in sync and it gave the bathhouse an inconceivable sense of wholeness.

Kuro Usagi who had followed Sala into the large bathhouse could not suppress her exclamation:

“Wow……!”

“Do you like it?”

“YES! This place really looks great!”

Kuro Usagi entered the bathhouse while gesticulating excitedly with her arms.

However, in the next moment, a tortured scream could be heard coming from the back of the bathhouse.

“Oi Pain…Ouch Ouch Ouch Ouch! Oi, Oi Oi! You……I say…..How many times must I tell you before you get it? Don’t use your fingernails to scratch me……”

“I can’t help it! This is my first time helping to wash another person’s hair, so just bear with it a little!”

Splash! And it was accompanied with the sound of water being poured.

Although Kuro Usagi and Sala didn't know what was happening, but those two voices sounded very familiar to them. As they walked closer to the two silhouettes that were somewhat blurry from the cover of the steam, what came into their sight was the scene of Asuka and Percher who were harmoniously……

"Okay, done. Next is the body. Now, turn behind."

"No……Don't want!"

"No isn't an option. If Izayoi-san's information is accurate, bathhouses shouldn't be that widespread during the 16th century. So you should take this opportunity to learn the culture of the Bath-taking Country!"

Splash!……Just like that, Asuka was washing Percher, albeit a one-sided affair it looked quite harmonious.

Although they had already been surprised that there were people who were much faster than them in the bathhouse already, the sight of Asuka helping Percher to bathe compounded to their surprise. Just what could have happened in the short ten minutes that they had taken to arrive at the bathhouse?

"Um, …… That……Asuka-san, why are you and Percher together in the bathhouse?"

Asuka instantly stopped her hands that were scrubbing Percher as she finally noticed Kuro Usagi and Sala's presences in the bathhouse.

Slightly blushing, she turned her face slightly as she mumbled something:

"……Izayoi-san forced us with a threat...…"

"A threat?"

"He said something like [Would you like me to strip you girls bare and scrub you clean? Or would you go hand in hand to wash each other harmoniously? Here, choose one now.] ……Hearing that, it sounded as if we would really be stripped by him if we tried to resist, so without a choice, I'm here helping her to bathe."

Saying that, Asuka's face blushed even redder and pouted.

[As……As expected from the strongest Problem child……even the method to persuade people to patch up their broken relations is of such a hearty and forthright manner……!]

Kuro Usagi was half in admiration of Izayoi's move in this matter and half in a daze with a tinge of melancholy.

Seeming to have some soap in her eyes, Percher was furiously rubbing at her eyes.

"That freak of a boy……Sooner or later, I will make him contract sepsis and die a pitiful death!"

"That sounds like a good idea. Tell me when you do, because I will gladly help as well."

Percher's voice sounded a little choked as her eyes started to tear up.

Having completed her task of washing the entire body, Asuka finally turned back to take a good look at Kuro Usagi and the other.

"Oh. Representative-sama came here too? "

"Yes. But don't call me Representative-sama. In this kind of setting where we appear with honesty without clothes, that way of addressing me will be too formal. Just call me Sala directly. I won't mind."

“Really? Then you can call me Asuka too.”

Exchanging a smile with each other, they grabbed Percher who was attempting to escape as they proceeded into the bathing pool.

As the smell of tree leaves and branches wafted up from the steam, the [No Name]’s bathhouse by the Water Tree Gift was similar in that aspect. After all, it’s only to be expected for the water tree of their Community had originated from this place. But in regards to the refreshing sensation and the concentration of the scent, to even permeate to the depths of the nasal cavities, it’s still [Underwood] that had that upper hand.

Ignoring Percher who was still throwing her tantrum, Asuka, Kuro Usagi and Sala seemed to huff a sigh of relaxation as they enjoyed their dip.

“You are called Asuka right? Although it might be a little late for me to say it but please accept my thanks for lending a hand when the Titans appeared for that has greatly saved us.”

“That’s nothing. After all, taking care of problems caused by Demon Lords are part of our motto…… and anyways, the one who really caused them to retreat wasn’t me.”

Asuka frowned as she sank lower to dip her shoulders under the warm waters. Until now, recalling that scene was still appalling and wretched.

Just at the moment when she was surrounded by the dense fog, the shadow that zipped pass her in a flash and the sound of metal clanging against each other. The Titans that started to be ripped and massacred in groups of twos and threes. And that

pure white knight that was dyed red due to the bloody fluids of the enemies she cut down.

“Faceless…… That’s not her real name right?”

“YES! She’s the favored loyal servant of the Demon Lord---The star class spirit in charge of gold and portals, [Queen Halloween]. As favored loyal servants, they are also knighted by her with a name and are to carry out certain tasks for her with that name.”

“They would receive an unprecedented Gift when they serve as the knights protecting their Queen. And it so happens that one of them is in this place, giving us quite a bit of breathing space.”

Sala had a mixed expression of relief and tension.

Asuka seemed to have lost her interest as she said an ‘Oh.’ before turning away.

“No matter how strong she is, she’s still one of the Demon Lord’s underlings right? I don’t see how we can trust that kind of person.”

“No, the time that [Queen Halloween] had been a Demon Lord is now in the long past……Ah, but she still isn’t the kind that can make people feel entirely at ease. According to Shiroyasha-sama, she’s called [One of the Biggest Three Problem Child in Little Garden].”

“Yep. When I was young, my nanny always use the “If you do bad things you will be napped away by [Queen Halloween]” kind of story to scare me.”

“Fufu, what’s that? That sounds just like Namahage or Raijin .”

"YES! That also shows how respected and feared she is in the cities of Little Garden."

"Is that so?"*Bulupluplup* Asuka replied before blowing bubbles under the water.

Sala swung her long hair back before asking as she suddenly remembered something:

"Come to think about it, Asuka, what's your Gift? Looking at it previously for just a while, I couldn't figure out what sort of Gift it was. But I guess it should be quite unique right?"

"Me? My Gift…… it's called [Ikō] , have you heard of it?"

"……what?" Sala widened her eyes as her pitch also rose by an octave.

Kuro Usagi wiped the blissful expression that she had previously and now took on a serious expression as she closed in on Asuka.

"Asuka-san, regarding your Gift, Kuro Usagi has something to tell you."

"……what is it?"

"The Gift that Asuka-san possess is definitely not an inferior talent…… but it isn't a Gift that can be counted as suitable for combat. This sort of talent that can allow the utilization of other Gifts to their best capabilities is best suited for the expansion of our Community. So, you needn't push yourself to participate in the Games of Demon Lords……"

"……"

Asuka had known that all along. And it was ever since her initial Game with Galdo Gasper that she had already realized that fact.

During the battle with Galdo Gasper, the battle with Ratten and also during her battle with Percher just a little while earlier…… she had always felt that she was being pushed into the corner due to her lack of physical strength. If only Asuka could possess one percent of Izayoi's strength, she wouldn't have had that hard a time in her battles.

"……Maybe it's just me wanting to be stubborn, I guess."

"Eh?"

"Before coming to Little Garden, I had never found myself lacking in any way. Although it could be said to be a long term dissatisfaction with the life, but I had a prestigious background, and my grades in academics would always be higher than that of the average……but after coming to Little Garden, the things that makes me itch with irritation has started to grow as much as the number of happy things I've experienced in here."

Asuka's expression was a little melancholic as she muttered. Although it sounded really ironic, but Asuka did understand that this was part of the flow in life where it gets choppy at times and calm and smooth sailing in others, and did welcome those changes and experiences. This is because right from the start, she had already possessed a very broad-minded approach in life and could accept the bitter and sweet dishes that were served to her in her life.

But she believed that the reason for her acceptance wasn't just due to the environment in Little Garden.

Asuka was acutely clear that it was due to friends like Izayoi and Yō who stood by her side that she could learn to accept all the things that life threw in her way.

"……To tell the truth, I'm not that worried about Leticia. For I'm very clear on how dependable she is. But Kasukabe-san……looked quite down lately…… so……"

And she couldn't help but be worried by that.

Hearing Asuka put it that way, Kuro Usagi was stumped for words.

"Asuka-san……"

*Bulupluplup*Asuka blew bubbles as she sank herself to the bottom of the pool.

Sala who had been listening by her side suddenly placed her hand to rest on Asuka's shoulder.

"Asuka's friend is called Kasukabe?"

"Eh?.....Yeah, that's right."

"Then, for tomorrow's search, I will make it a priority to search for your friend."

"……what?" Asuka and Kuro Usagi asked together. They had thought that a pair of human and rabbit ears may have heard it wrong.

But this was to be expected. Who would have thought that an Alliance representative would say words like leaving the main camp of [Underwood] to infiltrate the enemy's encampment?

But Sala only nodded her head forcefully as she said while staring at their faces.

"In exchange for that, I would like the both of you to defend [Underwood]. Although it's a Community and Community ground that I belong to for only a few years, but to me, it has already become my second home. With the two of you who possess

strong combat prowess, I guess I can have no worries as I go to infiltrate the enemy's citadel."

Saying that, Sala laughed heartily. Although this was said out of consideration for Asuka but the real intention was more than that.

To allow Sala who had the ability to fly to go to the citadel while Asuka who possessed the huge iron doll to face the Titans.

What she wanted to say might have been the fact that Games weren't played with only the power level in mind but the ability to assign the correct resources to the correct places where they would be best utilised.

Asuka gave a wry smile at Sala's attempt of encouragement but had also seemed to have accepted that piece of feelings to tuck away her burdens in her mind as she nodded her head in agreement.

"Okay, I understand. I will be defending [Underwood]…… I will be leaving Kasukabe-san to you."

"Nn. Leave it to me. I will use our flag… … my dragon horn to make an oath of it."

Sala pointed to her majestic dragon horns while giving it a *Klunk Klunk* knock with a certain degree of wanting to show off her prided horns. But that strange action caused Asuka and Kuro Usagi to burst out laughing and that caused the bathhouse to be instantly enveloped in a joyous laugh.

Part 4

---Ancient Vampire Citadel, Outer walls.

After the direction of their actions had been confirmed, Yō and the others started to spread out their search in a clockwise direction from one end of the Outerwall to make a loop around the castle grounds. The pathways in the ruins were abandoned for a long time and the wild weeds and flowers had already grown over it, making it difficult for the search to progress easily. Though the progress had been slower than expected, they were still able to find some useful clues.

With the castle as the centre, the outer walls had been divided into twelve sectors. And amongst them there were what could have been traces of a specific industrial sector and a commercial sector.

Jack reached out a hand to rub at the door of the Outer Wall's Gate as he bobbled his Pumpkin head in a nod.

"A sky city that has its urban area divided into twelve sectors……It just seems to reaffirm the thoughts of it being linked to the [Eliptical Path]."

"Nn. Perhaps each sector might also hide a secret."

"Yahoho! That might be possible too! Well then, I shall be doing the search from the skies. Kasukabe-san, follow Ayesha and the other children to do the search in the meantime then!"

Bubbling his Pumpkin head and ragged robes, Jack flew into the skies above the outer walls.

Yō who had been given the responsibility of watching the children, turned to face Ayesha---

"Oi Oi! You rascals shouldn't be climbing to those high areas! And when you try to lift larger pieces of rubble, get at least three people or more to do it together! What if you guys get hurt huh? …..Hah? You got hit by a rock chucked at you? Sheesh, what a bother! Oi, who was that fellow who chucked the rock, immediately stand out to apologize or I will punish you by hanging you upside down on a rope you rascal!"

……looks like there wasn't a need for Yō to be there.

[Will-O'-Wisp] seemed to be a Community that picked up and adopted many child spirits. Though Ayesha mightn't look like it, but she could have very well been used to taking care of kids.

[Right. Come to think about it, what's Garol-san doing?]

Yō looked around in search for Garol. Only to see him sitting before the doorway of an ancient mansion while holding his head.

His eyes were glued to the object in his palm and his whole body was continuously trembling.

Held in his hand was Kasukabe Yō's Gift---[Genome Tree]. Initially thinking to borrow the Gift to have a look for the purpose of drawing up a strategy against the Demon Lord with more knowledge on its ability, Garol was now unable to spare any thoughts for that kind of thing. After receiving the necklace in his hand, Garol's face had immediately turned green and his eyes widened to stare at the [Genome Tree] Gift seemingly in a daze.

[Although he said to give him some time alone……but is it really okay?]

Yō tilted her head as she worriedly watched him from afar.

Garol, sitting alone far from the others managed to squeeze out something close to a moan:

"……that ojou-chan said that……This……this was made by her father?"

Garol used his right hand to support his head as he continued to stare at the [Genome Tree].

Of all the people he knew, he could only think of one person who could have done it. And that person had been quite close to him.

Garol held the feelings of intense fear as he lifted his head to the skies.

[---With the ability to gather information from all living organisms and to allow the holder to continuously evolve: The Single Phylogenetic Tree……! Although I didn't dare to believe when I heard that she's called [Kasukabe], but I never did expect that it could be that huge foolish bastard……! Of all people, to actually choose to give this sort of thing to his own daughter……!]

Garol stared angrily at the lightning streaked skies above, seeming to see beyond it.

For in the frame of his eyes, the dream that he and his friend had talked about in the long past was being replayed.

An [All-rounded combat Anti-Demon Lord Equipment] regardless of the tactics and abilities that the Demon Lords may possess.

[If this is the original…… Then she may truly become the weapon of our dreams the [Anti-Demon Lord Equipment]. But Koumei…… Do you really intend to make your daughter become a monster?!]

Interlude 5

Part 1

---[Underwood], Downstream from the River, Foot of the Great Tree.

The next day, Izayoi and the others gathered at the plaza located at the foot of the Great Tree.

After the announcement was made to gather Players for the game, they had successfully managed to attract over a dozen Players from Communities that weren't part of their Alliance. And Izayoi was in a good mood as he looked at the 'Eagle and other Winged typed humanoid' Eudemons who have also gathered in the plaza but had a slight wistful look on his face.

"Really now. Why did Kasukabe have to choose this time to disappear? It's such a golden opportunity to meet other Eudemons too."

"Let it be… After all, as the saying goes, people will only meet if their paths are fated to cross. Yō -san will surely meet the one she's fated to meet and obtain the chance to have her power up."

Izayoi gave a little "Nn" as response to that, not wanting to comment further on it. Although he didn't hate that sort of romantic theory, he still felt that [A nice Fated encounter is to be something obtained through one's own hard work].

Waiting for Fate to arrange things in life wasn't that much different from waiting for death to arrive.

Not taking the initiative to secure your future but just waiting for luck to come your way, wasn't that the definition of being lazy?

"I had only given the opportunity to her because of those headphones. Looks like I have to complain a little when she returns it to me……"

"……eh?"

"Hm?"

Izayoi turned back to look towards Kuro Usagi, Asuka and Jin.

But his line of sight was attracted towards a rare looking Eudemon and the previous topic was soon tossed out of his mind.

"That's an Eagle's head and a long body……a Gryphon? No, the body may be covered with feathers but the bottom half of the body is a horse? Then that's a Hippogriff right?"

"Y……YES! That's the leader of [Two Wings], a eudemon cross between a horse with Eagle wings!"

"Iz…Iz…Izayoi-san, if you are interested, would…would you like to go over to greet him……?!"

"Okay, Sure. Since the [Two Wings] Leader is also here, then it's just a good opportunity for us as well. Ochibi-sama should also take this chance to promote yourself."

"Erm… Yes, I got it! If you guys meet Gry-san, please call us!"

"Ku…Kuro Usagi got it!"

Kuro Usagi gave an unnatural bow as she watched them depart. Izayoi had similarly returned the bow before happily walking along with Jin as they made their way towards the Hippogriff.

Whereas Kuro Usagi and Asuka who continued to stand in their original positions were feeling the prick of cold sweat on their backs as they exchanged a glance.

"……Kuro Usagi, didn't you say that Izayoi-san didn't mind it anymore?"

"That…That's because…Act, Actually, Kuro, Kuro Usagi forgot to tell him that the headphones had already been broken……!"

"You…You BakaUsagi! If you didn't tell him that, wouldn't it be worse?! Seeing from his response earlier, he's believing that the headphones would surely be returned to him! What happens then if he learns the truth upon meeting up with Kasukabe-san……!"

Uwa Kuro Usagi drooped her rabbit ears dejectedly. Moreover, when she had searched for information on Yō 's whereabouts previously, she had heard that the nekomimi headphones were seen hanging around Yō 's neck. And that would mean that there would be no hiding the fact once they met up in person. If things continued this way, it would cause both sides to meet in the worst situation possible.

The two of them were furiously dabbing at their cold sweat while gulping their saliva nervously.

"……Firstly stealing it, next framing, followed by destroying and then hoping to replace? No, even if it were me, I definitely wouldn't forgive that."

"Ku……Kuro Usagi also finds it unforgivable."

"Nn, I thought it was strange that even for Izayoi-san……No, precisely because it is Izayoi-san that I believe he wouldn't be able to forgive this kind of betrayal."

"Then…Then what can we do……?!"

A panic stricken Kuro Usagi was almost on the verge of crying then.

Asuka had also bitten her fingernail in irritation as she thought for a long time but still shook her head in the end, seemingly giving up on it.

"……Oh well, we can only let it continue and watch how it goes from there. After all, this is a problem between them. Having us meddle in it further might not help things either."

"But…But, what if their relations turn sour due to this, what should Kuro Usagi……!"

"If that time comes, I will help. And there's still Jin and the Senior group……needless to say, we should also remember to pull Leticia to our side to support us."

Asuka gave a wry smile as she gave a wink.

Kuro Usagi who seemed to have calmed down a little had also steeled her resolve as she clenched her fists while nodding her head.

"I got it! Since its decided, we must quickly clear the Game!"

"Nn. So, let's first defend [Underwood] for our plan."

Part 2

---*Pui!* Izayoi venomously spat at the ground while kicking up a tuft of dirt from the plaza grounds.

"……What's that, that stinky obnoxious Eudemon. It totally didn't seem to take us seriously! And why must we upon our first meeting be insulted with 'Monkeys that can't even fly in the skies', 'Useless little brats that don't even have sharp teeth and claws' and such? Could it be that the translator was pulling our legs? Compared to that, I would rather be called [mere No Names]."

"Well…..let's leave it…… After all, a Hippogriff is a third generation of a mythical beast and maybe they have a different level of pride……"

Jin was trying his best to calm Izayoi who was fuming about it.

---As a side note, a Hippogriff is a cross between a Gryphon and a horse that gives rise to a higher form of life. And because of the genes of a human or an animal is the most basic life form, Eudemons or God species that had two gene types were classified as higher beings.

The species that had one more evolution over that would then be called the Third Generation Mythical species.

"Moreover, it is rumored that there's an illegitimate son of Draco Greif in this region who's also seen as one of the candidates for the Floor Master position. Currently he has already taken up residence here and has quite an influence in the Alliance. Precisely due to the large amount of pride, the attitude was ……"

"Hah? That doesn't make sense. What we saw just now was a congenital haughtiness. It's totally unrelated to the pride that he had for himself, but it was

plainly an act of looking down upon the other species. Regarding those that use a different language or in appearance, he would take on an attitude of contempt towards them, and that's one of the worst personality types. It's no longer explainable with just saying that he had a [Lofty Pride in himself]."

Izayoi had never before burst out this loudly to accuse anyone this badly before and hence Jin was taken aback by his outburst. For the usual Izayoi who tended to shirk it off coolly to be ticked to this extent, it clearly meant that he was really pissed.

A fuming Izayoi and Jin returned to the side where Kuro Usagi and the others stood.

Just then, Sala and Gry(?) walked towards them from the opposite direction.

"……Ochibi-sama, is that the guy called Gry?"

"Ye…Yes."

Izayoi asked Jin for confirmation in a whisper. Perhaps the insults earlier really bothered him a lot as he seemed to take the meeting more cautiously this time.

Seeing Izayoi and Jin return, Kuro Usagi waved them over with her hands.

"Izayoi-san! This is Gry-sama whom we have told you about!"

"Nn, I know. But is there some reason for the Alliance representative to be here as well?"

"Well, it's not really a big matter. But I just wanted to pass this Gift to you."

Saying that, Sala took out a grass woven bracelet that had the [Draco Greif] Flag carved upon it. As he wore it onto his hand, Izayoi tilted his head quizzically for he did not feel any special changes.

"……Hm, Representative-sama?"

"Please wait for a moment……So Gry, what do you think?"

"Even if you asked me that…… I already understood Human Language in the first place."

Izayoi widened his eyes in wonder. It was rare to see Izayoi this surprised and hence the group of [No Name]s looked at each other in puzzlement.

For a moment, Izayoi couldn't believe his ears and he spoke up once more:

"…… You are Gry right? Could it be that this grass bracelet……"

"Nn. This seem to have been created by a famous Poet in order to translate Draco Greif's words into Human Language."

"Wha…What?! This is a Gift for translating languages?!"

Kuro Usagi's rabbit ears quivered in surprise but Asuka and Jin who couldn't understand the conversation could only tilt their heads in puzzlement.

Izayoi ran his finger along the grass bracelet as he admired its craftsmanship.

"Looks like the Poets in Little Garden are quite capable huh…… Oh, excuse my rudeness, I haven't made my self-introduction yet right? I'm Sakamaki Izayoi of the [No Name]s."

"And I'm Gry the Gryphon of [Thousand Eyes]. I've been in your care previously when the Titans attacked, but today let's do our best and work together as comrades who place our lives in each other's hands!"

Seeing how Gry was using a motivational tone and attitude, Izayoi widened his eyes for less than half a beat before seeming to nod in a good mood.

“Yep. I’ll be borrowing your back today, so let’s protect each other’s backs.”

Izayoi gave a hearty laugh. Seeing that Izayoi was finally out of his bad mood, Jin had also been relieved. But at that moment, Izayoi suddenly turned around---

“Oi, Ochibi-sama”

“Ye…Yes!”

“When I’m not around, I’ll be leaving the command to you.”

“……Aye?” Jin was frozen on the spot. But Izayoi’s expression didn’t seem to be joking---

“After all, you have always been watching our combat styles from the side up till now and should be the clearest on all of our strengths right?”

“Um…that…”

“Moreover, the current opponents are the Titan tribes whom Percher’s the most compatible in dealing with them. This is exactly the best chance for you to use the experience that you have gained through the previous battles…… Or could it be that you are afraid and wanting to back out now?” Izayoi asked in surprise.

Jin shook his head immediately to deny it.

“No, No problem. Leave the ground to us.”

“Okay, then I’ll leave it to you then. But please do not force yourself too much. If ochibi-sama were to die, all our efforts till now will go down the drain……and I

have to thank Representive-sama. For the difference between being able to communicate directly and otherwise is surely similar to that between heaven and earth."

"Oh that's nothing much. That item was originally created for only the Eagle, Lion and Gryphon races. If it weren't for the situation that we have today, that kind of relic would just continue to collect dust in a corner. So use it as you see fit….. Oh right, there's still another item that's for Asuka."

"For me?"

"I've heard from Kuro Usagi that Asuka , you have no armor or defensive equipment right? How can I allow you to help defend [Underwood] without some kind of protection right?.....So, I've dug out this old piece crafted by my very hands, from my collection for you."

"Crafted piece?" Asuka was confused. Obediently holding out her hands under Sala's gesture to do so, Sala took out a dark red Gift card. And with a faint red glow from the card, a pair of metal crafted accessories started to take form around Asuka's hands.

"These are…… handguards that have red and blue gems embedded in them?"

"Yes. On first look, it looks like a normal gauntlet type accessory so I thought that it would really match well with your dress. The Red Gauntlet's name is [Hand of Ruby] while the Blue one is called [Hand of Amber] and the gems embedded in them are of different Gifts."

Under Sala's prompt, Asuka started to study the various little gemstones that were embedded on her gauntlets.

"The rubies contain shavings from a Dragon's Horn while the amber holds the seed of the Water Tree. The Dragon's Horn and the seeds of a Divine Tree are of the purest pieces of Spiritual power. So with that in mind, I had created this simple Gift that can release flames and water……I guess having something is better than nothing right?"

"Of…Of course! But how can I accept such a gift like that without returning any…."

"No, it's not free. We still require all the [No Name]s and Asuka to protect [Underwood] so it's only natural to expect such gifts from us to support you guys." Sala smiled widely.

Seeing the smile that was much gentler than their previous meetings, Asuka felt a little lost for a moment but she was tactful enough to realize that it would be rude to continue pushing out of courtesy and so she put on a smile and gave a light bow in return.

"……I got it. Leave the protection of [Underwood] to us."

"Nn and I will be searching for Asuka's friend on my end."

As they exchanged a glance and a nod to each other, the bell to gather had also sounded and that caused Sala to suddenly shout in panic:

"OH…OH NO! It's already time?!"

"Ara ara? The Representative can also be late?"

"Wa~what a problem child!"

"No, Kuro Usagi thinks that the person who has the least right to say that is you, Izayoi-san."

Kuro Usagi quietly did a boke and tsukomi.

Sala did not bother about their comments as she started to sprint towards the location where the Representative was supposed to be before the start of the operations.

Part 3

---In the skies above [Underwood]. The Ancient vampire Citadel, Throne of the Elliptical Path.

A black robed female---the woman called Aura had claimed a space on the platform between the cornering in the stairway as she scried the movements of her enemy on the ground from a crystal ball before saying softly:

"……Your Highness, [Underwood] has made their move."

"Really? Then it's about time as well. Have you completed the preparations to meet their attack?"

"Of course. I've already scattered tōchūkasōes on the corpses of the Vampires outside of the Outer Walls. Seeing how corpses are the best seedbed for them, I would bet that the whole Outer walls would be swarming with them now."

Aura covered her mouth as she giggled. His Highness had also nodded his head in acknowledgement. As for Rin who was standing behind him, she continued to pleat His Highness's white hair while exclaiming in a surprised tone:

"Really~ I thought that the Participants needed more time ~"

"Hm? Why?"

"Isn't the ceasefire period for one week? It's only been three days and they shouldn't have to be so hurried in their actions. Moreover, there also seems to be quite a bit of casualties for their winged Eudemons. If I were them, I would have continued to focus on recuperating and saving strength up till the last moment……Hm and maybe around the fifth day, I would prepare the gathering of the main force that will scout the enemy's fortress."

Rin’s words caused His Highness and Aura to fall into deep thought.

They should be thinking that it had quite a bit of value to it even though this couldn’t be taken as an unbiased source.

“……Sounds like Rin’s conjecture might be right too. According to the shikigami reports, their main force didn’t even reach the count of 50.”

“Even if we add in the non-combatants, it should still be an addition of 5%.....That kind of numbers to face the Titan tribe, it’s a little too small.”

“Could it be that they are reserving their true strength or are calling for backup?”

“No, that’s not a realistic plan. In the current situation where the [Floor Masters] are being pressured, only people like Bull Demon King would be willing to help out Communities that are being attacked by Demon Lords. And Bull Demon King had already gone to help the [Onihime] Alliance. So the current possibilities that I can think of now are narrowed to these two!”

Rin raised her right hand into the air while pointing upwards with her fingers in the shape of a ‘two’.

“One is that the Participants have fallen into a situation where they have met a problem in the solving of the riddle and they are unable to make head or tail of it and are unable to control the pieces in the game to their liking anymore. Hence they are being reckless to the point of being willing to sacrifice themselves to try invade the Community Grounds of the enemy even if this might just be a ploy to lure them into a trap.”

Saying that, Rin curled her middle finger down.

Just then, a mocking laugh came from the shadows of the cloister's pillars.

"……how boring. But anyways, those guys are only a crowd of low level Communities clumping together."

The ferocious and ominous voice was brimming with haughtiness.

But Rin placed her hands on her hips in akimbo as she seemed to chide agitatedly:

"Gra-Oji-san! Don't be like that~! I feel that it won't do oji-san any good to have that kind of haughty attitude! For only third-rate Players would boast and lose due to underestimating their enemies!"

"……Hmph!"

Getting chided by a little girl, Graiya gave a dissatisfied harrumph.

But Rin continued to explain her conjectures with a composed face.

"The first possibility doesn't exist. Since Garol-dono had also arrived to attend this Harvest Festival and it would only be a matter of time before the riddle is solved. As for the Community who defeated Percher……No, it's [Black Death Demon Lord], they are also here and it shouldn't be making them fall into a troublesome situation as of yet. For if they could solve the riddle of [The PIED PIPER of HAMELIN], this game shouldn't be much of a problem to them."

"But that's only from your view right, Rin? So have you solved the riddle of [The PIED PIPER of HAMELIN]?"

"Nn. For something that follows the standard format without Punishments, I only took around five days to solve it. That riddle just required a lot of different

viewpoints of different worlds and eras to explain the [Piper of Hamelin] so it was a little challenging……Gra-Oji-san solved it yet?”

Graiya remained silent after giving two more grunts.

Sensing that she managed to out-argue the other, Rin lifted her finger once more to explain:

“But, for the first possibility to exist, it would only mean that the difference between our levels is far too great and nothing to be feared. It isn’t tough to handle impatient and frustrated enemies---so the problem lies with the second possibility.”

At this point, Rin’s face became more solemn, as the trace of mischief was wiped off her face and she squinted her eyes to study the surroundings.

“---And this is one of the worst possibility: The Participants on the ground have already solved the riddle and the current situation forces them to make an early strike. For example---an important person by some accident had been brought up into the Enemy’s citadel or something.”

“……!”

In a flash, everyone in their group had heightened their level of alertness.

The four of them had also released their murderous intents that seemed to press down thickly upon the castle to intimidate any lurkers that might have infiltrated inside.

The ancient castle that was crafted out of stone was giving out creaking noises but it would seem that there weren’t any enemy presences.

At least, there shouldn't be any other people inside the Castle keeps. For no one would have been able to keep their composure or not react to this wave of killing intent.

Rin lowered her voice as she said to His Highness:

"……If anyone finds out about me, Aura-san or Gra-Ojisan, it's not a big deal for it's still within our calculations. But if Your Highness were to be found out by the enemy, it would be troublesome for you, Your Highness, is our trump card. We cannot allow you to have your identity revealed in this kind of game so as a precaution, I hope that Your Highness will go down to the ground to hide."

His Highness nodded in agreement as he turned to Aura who was maintaining her level of alertness as she sighed.

"Aura, do you know the current statuses of the tōchūkasōes?"

"The tōchūkasōes aren't shikigamis……So even if they were to be defeated, I wouldn't know when or who they are."

"What about the shikigamis for surveillance?"

"Um, very sorry about that. I've sent them all to the ground below. For I thought to gather as much information from the place that seemed bustling with activities……"

His Highness gave a sigh before scratching his head. But this could only be said as an oversight of theirs. Recomposing his thoughts, His Highness instructed Rin and Aura:

"I understand your concern, Rin. If the Participants were to infiltrate in here, things would be problematic. I will leave things here to Gra-Oji-chan while you two should

meet up with the Titan tribes quickly to prepare them well for the attack on [Underwood].”

“Yes sir!”

“Mhn. Please take care, Your Highness. Don’t let anyone notice your identity.”

“Who do you think you're fretting about? Even if you do not say it, I will also enjoy this show before the end of the game…… but on the other hand, Rin, you better not trip up the plan due to negligence.”

Rin and Aura waved their hands in farewell as they disappeared into the darkness of the cloisters.

Seemingly tired, His Highness sat at the stairway while a wry smile floated to his lips.

“…… That person’s technique in creating Games is getting much stronger.”

“Yeah. And in addition to the Gift that she possess, Rin will surely become a dependable Game creator. The day that I will fall from my position as strategist will be soon.”

“Why do you think that……But, oh well, it’s not impossible either. Rin’s Gift can be called the ultimate Gift in a sense for there’s no way to counter it even if it were to be seen through by opponents.”

“Yep. Leaving the Ground to them would be enough. The castle keep will be guarded by me so may Your Highness go into hiding.”

“I got it……Oh, right.”

Seeming to have thought of something, His Highness turned back to smile at Graiya.

"About the person who holds that [Genome Tree], it's possible that the person might have unsuspectingly infiltrated into this Ancient Citadel."

"…… How can that be?"

"My guess is without grounds but I felt that it would be very interesting if it were to be true…… Don't you think so too? Graiya Greif."

His Highness walked around the back of the pillar. And appearing in the shadows was---A Jet black Gryphon that had a huge single horn on his head while a similar [Genome Tree] carving hung before his chest that depicted the Phylogenetic Tree.

"So how is it? The man who defeated your brother Draco Greif and the one who holds that same gift now becoming your opponent….. Do you have any thoughts on it?"

"It's impossible. The Phylogenetic Tree that he had created has already been carved on my chest. Even if the opponent uses a similar Gift, he or she wouldn't be able to match up to me."

Graiya proudly displayed the [Genome Tree] carved upon his chest as he stated it plainly. Hearing that, His Highness seemed to have lost all interest and showed a bored expression but he managed to squeeze out a fearless smile.

"Ah forget it. Anyways, as I've already mentioned to Rin and Aura, if the current possessor of the [Genome Tree] appears, I will allow you guys to drop whatever plans we had to make the securing of that Gift the biggest priority."

"Yes, Your Highness."

And with that, His Highness silently melted into the shadows while Graiya unfurled his jet black wings, which seem unthinkable to belong to a Gryphon, as he flew away from the cloisters that led to the throne room.

Part 4

--- A thousand meters above [Underwood].

Izayoi was braving the strong winds that rushed pass his cheeks as they travelled forth.

Before then, when the group that was assembled finally departed for the Ancient Citadel, Izayoi had already shouted in joy due to the feelings of excitement that couldn't be suppressed from the feeling of flying in the air on Gry's back:

"Haha, THIS IS REALLY GREAT……! With this I can finally somewhat understand Kasukabe's feeling! This kind of exhilarating feel that seems to accompany the speed that accelerates with every step, it can only be described as [Running on air]!"

"Hey, this isn't anything to exclaim about. If I really went full throttle, things would surely be different. If it were alright to break the formation, going five times this speed would be a simple task as well."

"Alright! Then what are we waiting for? Let's go!"

"Don't even think of it. And don't lean over so much. You too, Gry, please do not break the formation with any rash actions."

Sala who was flying beside them snapped at them upon hearing the direction of their conversation.

"Alright. Then what are we waiting for? Let's go!"

"Didn't I already say not to do anything reckless?"

……but Sala's preaching didn't seem to have much of an effect. And it caused Sala a mighty headache as she nagged at them to be more serious. But as they continued to fly towards the Ancient Citadel, the both of them[?] seemed to have gone silent, midway through the journey.

Reason being Izayoi the most troublesome problem child had his breath taken away by the aerial view of Little Garden.

Looking down upon the landscape of Little Garden from such a great height caused Izayoi to mutter softly:

"……This is quite an unbelievable sight. For the horizon to be visible even though this world is enclosed in a box."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. For an outsider like me, Little Garden is like the best treasure trove."

Izayoi squinted his eyes as he gazed into the distant horizons.

The horizon that was the combination of green plains and yellow soil could be seen despite being enclosed in a kekkai.

In addition to the azure blue skies above, it would then form a harmony of three colors and present a grand view.

"When speaking of traveling in air, I've always been under the impression that it would be in an enclosed narrow space that seems to press in on you uncomfortably…… but if it were to be as free and leisurely as this, traveling by air wouldn't be that bad."

"Really?" Gry responded with just a word.

The era that Izayoi had been from had quite an advanced flight technology but it wasn't too realistic to fly alone in the air. Even if one could pilot the machine, he would still face the problem of national boundaries and be restricted in his flight locations.

The main force continued to maintain their formation as they slowly climbed upwards.

Izayoi continued to look upon the grand sight of the horizon, enraptured in its beauty.

---and hence, he wasn't able to notice it earlier.

The jet black threat that suddenly appeared before the formation's fore front.

"……?" The first to notice the change was Sala.

A black shadow had appeared before the Ancient Vampire Citadel and it had a kind of non-existent sensation about it that seemed to make up a point that seemed to suck in all light around it.

To describe it simply--- it was like a black and round vortex. No matter how flat it looked and how intangible it seemed, it didn't change the fact that it looked strangely circular from all angles.

"Ah……."

The strange focal point had suddenly squirmed as it started to distort and morph.

---Contracting, Changing, Expanding. Accompanying the woeful cries and murderous intent that flowed out from its depths---

The group had all turned pale in terror, seeming to have been touched on the neck by the cold hand of a Death God.

“Ever….Everyone! Escape NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWW!”

The order to retreat that was shouted from the back seemed more of a shriek in pain, for it was too late.

From the skies where the peal of thunders originated, the abnormal vortex had shown its true form. A figure that had a cloak befitting a king draped over the shoulders while standing proudly with the back facing the lightning and thunder that rumbled continuously.

And with every flash of a lightning that lit up the whole region, that head of golden hair would reflect that light with greater intensity.

---Demon Lord Leticia Draculea.

She looked upon them expressionlessly while Sala’s chest had already been dyed red with blood.

Interlude 6

---The last few rays of the setting sun felt so hot on the skin that it seemed to vaporize the very blood from their bodies.

And what welcomed Leticia who had returned victorious after a fight with a Demon Lord wasn't the cheers and music to praise her triumph but the cries and wails that seem to make up a hellish orchestra.

"Hah…ah…"

The comrades that had returned with her had also breathed their last as they collapsed to the ground. If it weren't for the protection of her loyal subjects, Leticia would have lost her life as well. The situation was just so sudden that they could not come up with any other idea to go about it.

"Why…Why did it come to this……?!"

Leticia was dragging her left leg that had been badly burnt to a reddish black color as she ran with all her might. The commercial and industrial zones that had been bustling with activity just the other day, were now filled with the wails and screams of her comrades that were writhing on the ground in pain.

They were citizens who had inherited the blood of the Vampires. Although not of the purest bloodline, they were still one of the stronger species. Even if they were to be impaled all over, they wouldn't be able to die that easily.

The sight of all her Vampire comrades' bodies littering the streets could only be likened to the manifestation of Hell on Earth---

"Carla?... Knight Master?... Otou-san, Oka-san, Imouto where are---!"

“---Oh, those people you’ve just mentioned? I think they should be dead by now?”

Leticia stopped her hobbling run abruptly at that. As for the person who sprouted those ominous words, it was a man whom she hadn’t seen in her Citadel before.

Focusing her hatred and anger in her stare, she accosted the owner of the voice:

“You Bastard……!”

“Oi, Wait up. Let me say it first to clear up the misunderstanding. The culprit isn’t me. And just saying on a side note, I’m not one of their accomplices too.”

The man who had long and narrow eyes held out his index finger while saying it in a very calm voice.

This man who was slim and tall in physique was sitting at the side while his dressing was something that was very difficult to be put into words. And Leticia decided to suppress the turmoil that was her feelings in her mind for this moment as she started to assess the man’s demeanor.

---It was a strange dressing that made one wonder about questions like “Where’s that from”, “What is it” and “Why is it so”.

Leticia had initially thought that her cognitive abilities had been hampered but she soon realized that it wasn't the case.

And she came to the conclusion that ‘In other words, this man--- was a no body and wouldn’t have had mattered if it weren’t for the location and time that he chose to appear’ and with that, she decided to listen to the other calmly.

“Good, as expected of the [Dragon Knight]. I guess that’s part of your charm as well, to be able to maintain your sense of self even in anger.”

"……Get straight to the point. What do you want to say by coming to this place?"

"Of course. That would be for my job as the [Storyteller]. If you so wish it, I can recount to you about the tragic scene of the twenty thousand comrades of yours having painfully struggled while detailing their deepest thoughts and their darkest history to you. For it isn't a problem to me you know?"

"……Are you speaking the truth?"

Leticia didn't really care about this man---[Storyteller] 's claims for all she wanted was to know the truth. And [Storyteller] who had been cheerful during his self-introduction had dropped his shoulders in disappointment, but perhaps Leticia's forlorn look seemed to have touched him as well as he wiped the elusive smile off his face while giving a shrug.

"Come to think of it, do you know what had happened here?"

"Of course. To cause us Vampires---[The Knights of Little Garden] to be pushed to this state of death within a few minutes, there can only be one way!"

Leticia's bloodshot eyes were streaked with the dilated blood vessels as she stared angrily at the setting sun.

---The large veil that was used to prevent Sunlight from entering Little Garden directly.

The mechanism that was created to allow races that couldn't live under the direct Sun's rays. To say that it was specifically made for the Vampires wouldn't be an exaggeration as well.

The veil to cover the biggest weakness of the Vampires---Sunlight while helping to conduct the heat and warmth through the Little Garden, had now been drawn aside by a certain someone.

“But the drawing of the veil requires a Sun Authority---One of the [Ecliptic path of the Twelve Zodiacs] or [Ecliptic path of the Twelve Chén]! Why would the current holders of the Sun Authorities do such a thing?!”

Leticia bared her teeth as she shouted angrily. It was precisely due to the Sky Shroud that prevented the direct rays of the Sun from entering Little Garden that they of the Vampiric Race had worked so hard to protect its peace.

And now those Sun Authority holders had trampled on their pride!

“---The culprit is a Vampire.”

“……eh?”

“I’ve said it before and I will say it once more. The culprit is a Vampire. In other words, this is an internal strife. Haven’t you heard of it? The rumors that to reward the contributions of the Vampires, they have decided to design and set up a Thirteenth Elliptic Zodiac?”

Leticia was in a daze as she shook her head.

Before this, she hadn’t heard of such a thing as a new Elliptic Zodiac.

“But……eh?”

“For some of the Vampires, it’s like the manifestation of their dreams isn’t it? To be able to receive the Authority of the Demonic Star that tortures them for so long,

that's a chance in a lifetime that might not come by twice. And with that in mind, a conflict breaking out from within shouldn't be much of a surprise."

Leticia was tongue tied as she couldn't find a way to command it to make a reply.

That's because this sort of thing did not make sense to her. Vampires trying to kill Vampires by bathing their opponents in the Sun, as long as they did this sort of thing……they would also face the threat of being exposed to the same fate too.

And with just a few minutes of releasing the veil, it shouldn't be able to cause the Royalty and Purebloods to be annihilated!

"Hm? Oh, I see. I guess you got the sequence mixed up."

"……?"

"Look over there."

The man shrugged his shoulders in that same vague attitude of his as he jerked his chin towards the highest point of the Citadel.

Rather dubious about it, but under his prompt, Leticia decided to turn her gaze towards the Castle's tip.

Because of the architecture and choice of color, the whitewashed sharp peak of the castle was also visible from the Outer walls.

And on its peak, her sister, mother, father and all the people closest to her had their clothes nailed there while streaks of dark blackish residue that might have been their blood stains or ash trailed out from the bottom of those clothes---

"Those are your family."

“Aa-----!”

“The pure-blooded Vampires will not go down that easily. So running them through a thousand times with swords and nails before piercing through their hearts! And lastly to use the Sun to cremate them, it sure is a thoroughly thought out process! The guys in the Outer walls should be utterly shocked by this! For its surely unthinkable for them to imagine this sort of craziness just for the killing of the purebloods--- To draw back the veil just for the sake of killing out the Royalty!”

[Storyteller] hugged his sides as he laughed about it.

In other words, while she had been engaged in a death fight with a Demon Lord, the revolution had already ended.

Leticia’s knees went soft and she knelt to the ground with her head bent low. Her left leg that had been burnt by the Sun was starting to make its way up to her body and giving her a sharp piercing pain in her bones.

The previously warm and gentle sunlight under the veil was no longer so. The Setting Sun was currently similar to the doors of hell that trapped all who were under it.

The Vampires…… the [Knights of Little Garden] had fought so hard till today to prevent such a tragedy .

“Right! The rebels had also generously passed out the message that they would be taking your head after sun down. It’s said that the true ritual to obtain the Thirteenth Zodiac can’t be held successfully if they do not have your head. And there isn’t much time left before sun down. You should start thinking on the next step to take right? Whether to rebuild your Community or to run away, it’s your choice.”

"……"

Leticia got up unsteadily as she continued forth while dragging her useless left foot to the destination she had in mind---the Community Grounds of the Vampires.

"Oi! What are you planning to do with that kind of body?"

"……there's no hope for this Sun-wasted body of mine anyways."

"That's not true you know? As long as you get the proper treatment, it's still salvageable……So here's the thing. Let's have a deal! Join my Community [Grimm Grimoire]---"

"I reject."

Leticia had a black pistol jammed at the neck of [Storyteller] in a flash.

The man was awed by the reflexes that didn't seem to belong to that of a dying person but he continued talking in his cool demeanor:

"But, if you want to face the betrayers of your kind, your current self wouldn't be able to drag more than a couple of them with you to your grave you know? Didn't your comrades die for you not too long ago to shield you? Or do you mean to say that sacrificing your life here isn't going to matter?"

"……"

Even then, Leticia continued to trudge her way towards the Castle.

And lining the sides of the road were her Vampire comrades who were moaning in pain as they were tortured by the Sun's rays. Woefully taking the sight of her surroundings with her eyes, Leticia continued to trudge on slowly.

It’s just a matter of time that they would meet their end for their bodies were almost completely wasted by the Sun’s rays.

They were all dying just because of some stupid Vampire of an unknown identity plotting to obtain the Sun’s Authority.

“……I don’t know who the rebels are, but as the country’s ……no, as the leader of the Community, I’ve the obligation to save what may remain of my people by welcoming the enemy’s battle under my Flag.”

Even if they were about to die soon enough, she couldn't bear to leave them be.

And a conflict from within the Community had to be judged by the laws of the Community.

This is one of the iron-clad rules of Little Garden that had existed since the time of its creation and wasn’t one that would change even if it were to be struck by lightning.

The pride and rules of the Community were represented by the Flag. If one had to meet-out judgement on the rebels, they could only use the Flag to do so. Leticia who held that belief in her heart was moving step by step closer to the Castle.

[Storyteller] seemed to have finally lost his cool as he drooped his shoulders and shouted:

“Aye……Oi, [Dragon Knight]! I have a plan that can kill only those rebels!”

“Eh?” Leticia stopped in her tracks as [Storyteller] tossed a letter to her.

“I’m [Storyteller]---and also known as a Game Creator. To put it plainly, I’m a sort of Poet as well and this [Geass Roll] is specifically designed to have its Game rules

make the most use out of your [Authority of Host Master]. With its contents, you needn't worry about pulling down your Community for you will cause yourself---Leticia Draculea to become a Demon Lord."

"What….What nonsense are you sprouting! To ask me, a Vampire to become a Demon Lord?! That's totally out of the question! Even if this body of mine were to be destroyed, I will not fall to that extent and bring such shame to my kind!"

"Hah……Stop clinging to all your empty dreams, you're just a little girl who doesn't even know how the real world works around you!"

His loud rebuke caused Leticia to cringe involuntarily.

The atmosphere around [Storyteller] had completely changed as he took a step closer while putting on an intimidating air around him to stare at Leticia.

"Shouting to protect things that you aren't able to protect, making a fuss about wanting to save those that cannot be saved?! HoHoHo, That really tickles my side O-hime-sama! Those dreams that righteousness will triumph are so sweet that it really makes me feel like puking and crying tears of pity!"

"Wha…"

"Didn't you say about protecting the pride of your kind?! Just use that brain of yours to think a little! If you were to fall in such a battle to those rebels, what would happen to the things that your kind had worked up till now to build? What those guys have in mind is the position of [Overall Floor Master] and the Sun's Authority! Wouldn't the previous dream of your kind to bring peace and equality to the world of Little Garden be made into a joke when they succeed?!"

"This……That is…"

“In the end, you just had to blurt it out that you wanted to sate your thirst for revenge and leave this world! And by doing so, announcing the biggest lie of [Doing it for the sake of others]?! Aaaaah, really distasteful. Really leaves a bad after taste to have met such a foolish person! For it sure makes me who has actually travelled all this way to find you out of good-will to become the biggest fool as well!”

It would seem that [Storyteller] was very high strung as he rattled off his insults and complaints in a steady stream. Leticia who couldn’t find a way to retort to those words had bowed her head instead, but she did not feel resigned to her fate. In fact she was feeling so unsatisfied by the current situation that she trembled.

Perhaps it was the complete release of all those pent up frustrations, [Storyteller] had finally relaxed his shoulders as he readjusted his breathing---

“……Listen up well. If you intend to rebuild your kind, running away from the problem will not do any good. Become a Demon Lord and kill those rebels. Although there might be some name left behind about your accomplishment after your death if you followed your plan, do not be so naïve as to think that your name will be attributed to anything great once you've lost to them.”

“……”

“If you are killed here today, that would just be counted as their win. But if you become a Demon Lord and execute all the rebels, that might still leave other. viable. routes for you. At least it would be able to keep the system of implementing [Floor Master]s……But the downside would just be the insults heaped upon the name of Leticia Draculea.”

[So what do you intend to do?] [Storyteller] had ended it off with a noncommittal shrug of his shoulders that seemed to imply his thoughts.

Leticia suppressed her anger as she unsealed the letter. And holding the roll with her trembling hands, she confirmed the contents written on it.

Being tongue-tied from the cruelty described in its contents, Leticia's expression only helped [Storyteller] to have a smile more uncouth than before.

"Placing the rebels through the same suffering that they did to your family and friends. And not limiting it to only once or twice but a punishment that continues till eternity! With such a cruel feature in it, I bet that it would sate your thirst for revenge completely right?"

"……"

"If the time comes that you are finally tired of whipping the corpses, or if the day comes that you want it to end, just call someone to clear the game for you. And if you can find a person to help you clear the game, you may want to tell him this: 'Attack the Thirteenth Sun'."

And with that, the man turned to leave.

"I would also like to remind you that those who become a Demon Lord will definitely be burdened with the fate of being destroyed. Be it by the Gods or heroes. But this is part of the fate that will surely follow one who has defied the natural order of the Stars. So, Leticia Draculea. You will have to prepare yourself to be determined enough to give up everything---"

---To become the cruel Demon Lord who kills your own kind.

That man seemed to say it so softly seemingly like a whisper of adoration to his lover as he disappeared without a trace.

Soon enough, the Sun had sunk beyond the western horizon and the color of night had started to cover the skies.

The rebels that had been in hiding away from the Sun had started fires in the Outer walls to immolate their betrayed comrades who had still been moaning in pain with their last few scrapes of life.

Leticia watched it all in a daze and it didn't take long before the rebels found and surrounded her. She who had her body almost completely wasted by the Sun had already lost half of her body senses.

As such, her arm that wielded the gun could no longer be felt and lowered to point at the floor, unresponsive to her commands.

…...Still unable to bring her heart to point her sword at her former comrades, she started casting her eyes about frantically---

And that was when her gaze caught sight of the Castle's peak where the black stains seemed to act as the markers to the graves of her loved ones.

"……"

---that's right. Those were the markers of her loved ones' graves.

Her many comrades, close friends and family. None of them had been buried as they all become a scorched stain on the Castle walls.

And since that's the case, those guys should also suffer the same punishment as their crimes.

As tears and blood flowed in a steady stream from her eyes, Leticia roared out the hatred that had taken seed in her heart:

"---You bastards……You do not even deserve the reprieve called death……!"

And that were the words of hatred that were once vented out upon former comrades before the souls of the rebels were shredded to bits, having sworn to spare naught even their nails---Leticia took on the branding of a Demon Lord.

Interlude 7

Part 1

---Three thousand meters above [Underwood].

The spray of blood across her chest caused Sala to be stumped for words.

She had already mentally prepared herself for death as it was an unavoidable strike. The spear that was thrown at her at a speed far exceeding the normal ranges---had almost pierced Sala's chest.

"……why?"

"…Urgh…"

If it weren't for that guy---Sakamaki Izayoi who shielded her behind him…

"You…You…"

"Scram! Get Lost! Didn't I tell you to run! Oi! Those at the back! Do you not have ears grown on your head to hear me?!"

Izayoi, who had leapt from Gry's back in the nick of time to take the strike for Sala, placed pressure upon his pierced left arm as he roared to the rest.

And Izayoi's roar seemed to put the flow of time back to normal once more as they started to disperse like a flock of birds sighting a larger predator---Leticia who had suddenly appeared. But this had also been taken into calculations by her.

The bloodshot eyes were locked onto every fleeing figure and whipping up numerous spears from the shadow of the dragon, she aimed towards them. The first strike had been blocked by Izayoi but it would be a different matter altogether if he

were to try do the same thing for a hundred spears. For that would be too numerous to be blocked, even for him.

He opened his mouth to shout in the winds as he leaned on Sala to hold his weight up---

“Sala! Do you have any weapons?! Preferably one that has a long handle? I need it to be durable and strong!”

“I…I got it!”

Sala summoned a trident from her Gift Card which she handed over to him.

Grabbing the trident with his right hand, he leapt back to Gry’s back as Gry came over to fetch him.

“My left hand doesn’t seem to be able to exert much strength anymore. The most I can do is to use it to hold the reins so I’m just going to leave the maneuvering to you.”

“Okay, leave it to me---and here it comes!”

The shadow spears were launched simultaneously. And according to the estimation of what Izayoi could see, there were more than a hundred spears.

Continuously wielding his trident, Izayoi knocked away many of those spears that were traveling at five times the speed compared to the speed of Leticia’s spear on their first meeting.

Sala who couldn’t dodge them completely had released a wall of flames before her to change the trajectory of the spears. But if it weren’t for Izayoi’s help, this situation of coming to a draw wouldn’t have been possible to achieve.

Confirming that the hundreds of spears had been completely thrown, Izayoi gave a sidelong glance at the Citadel protected behind the back of Leticia as he started to think about the situation.

Why is this happening? Although it doesn't seem to be the real Leticia, but given the fact that this is still during the period of ceasefire, the host shouldn't be able to provoke a fight with us right? In other words, that thing should be [something] unrelated to the game……

For example--- A self-activating Gift that the host had prepared from the start to deal with situations like [Trial Jurisdiction] that is independent from the Game.

And it was Izayoi's speculation that it must have been a trap laid for them during the creation of the game and has been waiting for people to activate it.

A defensive Gift that belongs to the Vampire Citadel……That should be the closest conjecture right?

Izayoi who had reached that temporary conclusion decided to stop thinking about it and he turned back to ask Sala.

"Representative-sama, do you know what that Leticia-looking thing is?"

"No……but the sensation that was emitted from those spears shot at us seemed very similar to that of the Dragon Horn of Shodai-sama."

"Shodai-sama?"

"The ancestor of [Salamandra], the strongest dragon of the dragon kind---Dragon King of the Stars and Seas . The remains or relics of the Pure-blooded Dragons can be used as Powerful Gifts. Sandra's Dragon Horns are one of those."

"The remains of a Dragon……something equivalent to Śarīra, the sacred relics of Buddhism?"

"Yes. And it's quite a Strong Relic."

"I see…" Izayoi nodded his head.

Come to think about it, Ojou-sama did tell me before that Leticia was able to control the shadow of the dragon. Then, could it be that the shadow had taken the form of Leticia?

But if it were only that, things still felt a little off.

The strength that was behind the spear thrown at him on their first meeting was far inferior to what he had just experienced. If it were the former Leticia he had known, even if he gave her the upper hand, he would have been able to dodge it without any problem.

Although it could also be the increase in power level due to the return of her Demon Lord status……the biggest possibility might be the [Divinity] that the enemy took from Leticia.

And if that were so, things would click into place.

The reason for the enemy to take away Leticia.

The reason for releasing her sealed [Authority of Game Master].

For if things were that way…… the temporarily coined term of [Demon Lord Alliance]'s real identity might just be……

The mysterious Demon Lord that had laid waste to the [No Name]s three years ago.

Upon reaching that conclusion, Izayoi felt his fighting spirit fired up as it spread in a warm glow radiating in his chest.

Ha! What great luck we have! For them to come before us even before we go looking for them, this really saves us the trouble!

Izayoi exposed his incisors as he gave a savage laugh at that before giving a sidelong glance at Sala---

“Representative-sama, you should also return to the ground as well.”

“Eh?!”

“You will just be a bother here.”

Izayoi’s words were merciless as he knew for a fact that an aerial battle was already a disadvantageous position for him and to battle with a shadow of Leticia that had obtained Divinity? According to Izayoi’s judgement, protecting Sala while fighting would eventually cause him to reach his limits---

But Sala shook her head---

“No, I can’t. I’ve been entrusted to search for your comrade by Asuka and since there’s a strong foe appearing before us, I cannot just turn back so easi……”

---Ploom! The next moment, the sound of a huge explosion filled the air.

Thoughts of the Leticia that stood before them were wiped clean from their minds at that sound for the both of them looked down towards [Underwood]---

"---Gahouhouhouhouhouhouhouhouhouhouhou----!"

The huge army of Titans came into view as they launched their attack upon [Underwood].

“The Titans?.....How can it be?! How can they travel here in such a short time?!”

“Beats me. But since they are here, I guess there should have had some method to do so. And from what I see, things below have been thrown into chaos. Without someone to take command, wouldn’t that be bad?”

So what do you want to do? Izayoi asked meaningfully with his eyes.

Sala turned to look at the Ancient Citadel and back at [Underwood] before nodding with a bitter expression on her face.

“……I get it. Don’t overdo things yourself as well.”

“I will try my best.”

Izayoi replied while tearing off his uniform’s sleeve to make a tourniquet over his left shoulder to stop the blood flow. Making sure to see off Sala with his eyes as she rapidly descended, he then gave a bitter smile as he told Gry:

“Sorry bud, making you stay with me here.”

“Don’t mind it. After all, it’s just another enemy whom we have to face sooner or later.”

Gry gave a snort as he laughed.

However, the biggest problem that he was uneasy about was the possible difference in agility between them. Though Leticia might not be moving from her original spot, but her speed in flying should have also been heightened by the possession of Divinity.

Izayoi gave his trident a twirl as he gripped the reins of Gry with his other hand.

“Okay. So let’s first compare our speeds. I will handle all the spears that are shot from the enemy while I’ll leave it to you to push forth with the aim of making a landing on the Citadel!”

“Got it!”

Gry flapped his huge wings and controlled the whirlwinds as he started to close the distance. Leticia who was powered up by Divinity had also immediately turned to welcome the fight against Izayoi and Gry who were moving faster than before.

The collision between both sides caused the skies of [Underwood] to reverberate with the sounds of fierce metal clashes as each and every of the Black Spears of Shadow, that were shot towards them, were knocked away.

Soaring through the boundless skies while wielding the trident with such force that it would send tremors through mountains and rivers.

Rippling the air like agitated waves, the battle where the combatants willingly betted their lives on the line, displayed a surprising amount of strength and will as the fierce battle continued to unfold in the skies.

Part 2

---[Underwood], South eastern Plains.

The third attack had truly taken them by surprise.

Moreover, it was much different from the previous surprise attack that was launched in the cover of the fog for the Titans had just appeared on the plains before the hill, without any sign of forewarning and had launched a fierce attack together.

"Gahouhouhouhouhouhouhouhouhouhouhou----!"

Waving their huge swords that easily reached the size of two grown men, the Titans waded across the river and smashed through the dike.

The sentries on duty scrambled back to the city as fast as they could while blowing their whistles to alert the others.

“Bad News! Things are really bad! The Titans are breaking through into our city very soon!”

“Hmph! Didn’t the Representative tell us that the Titans have retreated to the plateau?!”

A disheveled-looking hippogriff who was the leader of [Two Wings] roared loudly from the plaza located at the foot of the Great Tree.

“As expected of them, they had chosen this time for their attack.”

“Of course they did. Now that our strength is divided, it's surely one of the best opportunities for the enemy to take advantage of.”

“Well, I guess that's the cue for us to make our appearance---PERCHER!”

Appearing from the ring of the Pied Piper with a swirl of black wind, Percher stepped out not in her maid attire anymore but dressed in her polka dotted dress that she wore during their first meeting.

Though Percher usually had that nonchalant look on her face, it seemed that she still remembered the traumatic experience from before as she frantically turned away from Asuka.

“Jin-chan, have you come up with a plan yet?”

“Yes. Starting off with the threat of the Titans, it shouldn't be much of a problem since we have Percher with us. The main problem would be how to retrieve [The Death Eye of Balor] that has been stolen by the enemy……”

Hearing the words that came from Jin’s mouth, Percher’s brows immediately knitted together.

“…… what? The enemy has [The Death Eye of Balor] in their hands?”

“Nn. But Sala-sama said that it isn’t the original Demon Lord Balor's Eye but a magical eye that has similar properties.”

“What do you mean by similar in characteristics……The beam released by [The Death Eye of Balor] is the same as the [Beam of Medusa]. Once it is awakened and unleashed, there’s no defending against that and without a similar class of God or even Star class spirits, there’s no way for us to even hope of fighting against such a thing!”

Facing Percher’s accusing glare, Jin nodded his head in a half-hearted assent.

"Nn. I feel that way too and that's why I think of enacting the legend of [Defeating Balor]."

Jin turned to look at Kuro Usagi.

And Kuro Usagi also seemed to have caught on to the plan as she lifted her rabbit ears up high while nodding her head.

"Could it be……Kuro Usagi's turn to appear?"

"Nn. Kuro Usagi has the [Mahabharata Papers] ---allowing her the use of Indra's Spear. In theory, it should be able to pierce [The Death Eye of Balor] for if the legends told the truth, the holy spear that defeated Balor was one that was used by the main patron Celtic god which is imbued with the powers of absolute precision."

Percher kind of frowned in displeasure upon hearing that.

To hear this conversation and the direction it's heading towards after having been defeated by that kind of spear before, it sure must be a complicated feeling for her.

---It's just as Jin named it: [Defeating Balor]. The legend of how Balor was defeated. Amongst the Titan tribes, there was one Demon Lord that had immense strength and a body that was as strong as steel. The durability of his body was so tough that even using [Claíomh Solais. The Demonslayer] did not have any effect on that strong warrior.

"The method that defeated Demon Lord Balor was the use of [Holy Spear. Brionac] to pierce through his Death Eye just when he was opening it to use his Gift. I'm hoping to substitute the use of [Brionac] with [Indra's Spear]…… Kuro Usagi, are you up to the task?"

"YES! Leave it to me!"

Kuro Usagi had perked up her rabbit ears as she puffed her well- endowed chest with pride.

"Good. The start of the battle will be handled by Asuka-san and Percher to create confusion between their ranks. Upon forcing the enemy into a tight situation, the enemy will surely bring out [The Death Eye of Balor]. And that's when Kuro Usagi who will be stationed at the crown of the [Underwood]'s Great Tree will make her move. After confirming that the enemy's going to use [The Death Eye of Balor], you would then use Indra's holy spear to launch the finishing strike……What do you think about it?"

"……Hmph, I guess it's a tactic that cannot be disputed that easily."

Percher had a look of surprise on her face which she quickly covered up with her usual nonchalant smile as she looked towards Asuka and Kuro Usagi.

"Oh right. I almost forgot that you guys also have a freak rabbit too."

"Freak……"

"Well then, Little Red girl, let's make a move."

"I'm called Asuka. Please call me by my name, [Black Death Demon Lord]."

"Oh really? I will give it some consideration when I'm in a good mood."

Percher whipped up her black winds as she ended the conversation at that, flying off into the skies in a cloud of smog-like winds, before Kuro Usagi could even find her chance to make a retort, as she made a beeline for the Titans that were launching their attack upon [Underwood].

Asuka had also pulled away from the others as she headed off to meet the rush of the Titans.

But where she headed to wasn't to the front lines of the battle, but the last defense line that protected [Underwood].

"After all, I did promise to protect [Underwood]---So Deen, let's go!"

Raising her Gift card, Asuka went forth to bolster the ranks of the Eudemons and beastmen.

And as the group of [No Name]s started to join the fray, the battle continued to intensify.

Part 3

---Ancient Vampire Citadel, Outer walls

At this point, Yō and the others had finally completed their search mission in the Outer walls that was divided into twelve sectors and have brought the items that represented the [Twelve Zodiacs] together.

Following procedure, Yō who was sitting on an old and broken fountain's edge started with a question:

"We will now start on collation of the reports. Jack, have you found anything while flying in the skies throughout the whole operation?"

"Yahoho……Unfortunately, no. I've not found anything much other than the distinct division of the Citadel into twelve sectors and that there's a symbol to represent the twelve zodiacs on the outer walls of each sector."

"Symbol? Is it so for every sector?"

"Yes. The sector that we had first met up in was under the symbol of Libra. And from there, the adjacent ones were Scorpio and Sagittarius and so on. They were all arranged according to the sequence of the twelve zodiacs, but other than that…."

"Is that so? Thank you. Well, Ayesha and Kirino, how were things on your end?"

Hearing that it was their turn, the both of them smiled at each other as they presented a big gunny sack before Yō.

"Hoho. This is our find!"

"We have found shattered pieces that had the twelve zodiacs engraved upon them and fourteen pieces of what might have been another constellation!"

- Klunk!* Ayesha and Kirino poured out the contents in the sack by tipping it upside down at the same time.

Amazed by the find, Yō and Garol started to pick up the pieces that have been gathered to have a closer look.

“A constellation that’s not of the [Twelve Zodiacs]?”

“OiOi…… what’s this? Could it be that we have been misled?”

The two looked at each other with unease forming in their hearts for they mustn’t have expected to find an item that depicted a constellation that didn’t belong to the [Twelve Zodiacs].

Ayesha and Kirino who had thought that they would be commended for their job well done had immediately caught on to the mood that was before them and looked crestfallen.

“Eh…. ? Could it be that we have done something unnecessary?”

“No, that’s not it! Just that these shattered fragments could be something left by the enemy to mislead ---”

“……so we did do something extra?”

“Ah…No… I already said that it’s not the case……”

Garol was desperately trying to find a way to explain the situation tactfully.

In the meantime, Yō was holding the fragments of the constellations while constructing the completed form of all the pieces as she fitted them in her mind.

These shattered pieces seem to be curved like the surface of a sphere. If the zodiacs were to be fitted together, it would probably form a sphere. If the pieces were to be completely gathered, it would probably be something like a jigsaw puzzle that can be fitted together……

But, how would that be significant?

What if they were to waste all their time on this sort of thing before the start of the punishments? Wouldn't that be playing exactly into the hands of the Host? If she were to believe in her own conjecture, this might be an unnecessary step to take.

"……Kirino, what kind of structures did these fragments lie under?"

"Eh……The twelve zodiacs were found in a huge ruin that looked similar to a shrine while the others were found when we went through other debris."

"Is that so." Yō replied. As she had thought, these twelve zodiacs were treated differently.

But, if she were to get the wrong conclusion due to over-confidence in her own theory, it would be a waste of effort.

Yō worked her brain as she made a checklist of all the key words that they had identified previously.

[---[Zodiac], [The twelve zodiacs], Satellite created by gods, the same trajectory as the Sun, the division of the celestial longitude, [broken fragments of the constellations]……broken fragments?

Yō lifted her head abruptly as she picked up two fragments in her hands. The two that she held were Libra and Scorpio.

And these two fragments had their cracked off seams matching perfectly beside each other---

"……Ah, solved it."

"Huh?"

"Solved it…… I……solved it! I found the solution!"

Yō abruptly stood from the ledge of the fountain---

"[broken fragments of the constellations] and the satellite! The elliptical path of the Sun! And the other way to explain it……Something that can be [broken, presented]! With that, everything has been connected at last! These broken fragments hold the key to be presented to the throne!"

Even she couldn't believe what just happened. She had only thought of finding as much clues as possible while waiting for the arrival of Izayoi, Asuka and the others.

Yō gave a whoop of delight, which was the first that ever came out of her mouth, as she hugged Ayesha tightly.

"Eh? Wa…Wait a moment!"

"Ayesha! Kirino! You guys have done very well! With this, Leticia can be saved! [Underwood] will be saved as well!"

Yō continued to act as her feelings dictated as she grabbed Kirino's hand to shake it up and down vigorously.

Kirino's face had also lit up as she answered:

"Then this…This game…"

“Nn. Once we bring these broken fragments to present to the throne later…… the game will be cleared!”

Part 4

---Top of the Great Tree, [Underwood].

Kuro Usagi had positioned herself on the dense growth of Water Tree leaves.

From that vantage point, she could oversee the whole battlefield and at the same time, that position offered her a kind of protection as enemies who might notice her would have a hard time climbing up to where she was.

Watching the black whirlwinds that was Percher, Asuka and Deen's brave standoff with the enemies, Kuro Usagi's eyes were filled with worry.

"……Asuka-san and Yō-san aren't weak. Logically speaking, the talents that are germinating in their bodies should be much stronger than Kuro Usagi's. Just that when placed beside Izayoi-san, they seem to be cherry blossoms that are late to bloom…… given ten years, they would surely grow to become a one of the handful that are counted as a strong force to be reckoned with."

But in human terms, especially for those teenage girls, ten years would be too long. Izayoi was a little more mature in that sense but if it were to be any normal teenage girl or boy to set a goal to be achieved by the end of ten years, that would surely be quite a painful drudgery for them.

And even as she thought of that, Kuro Usagi was also at a lost as to the method to guide them along in their development.

Yō's Gift could not be activated by those that weren't encompassed in her Phylogenetic tree. Hence even if she were to get close to Kuro Usagi who belonged to the Moon faeries, there would be nothing to be gained from the friendship.

On the other hand, Asuka's Gift seems to have a glimmer of hope but it was still in the guessing stage and couldn't be confirmed as of yet. No, to be exact, even if the guess was right, that Gift would most probably be something that Kuro Usagi has no way to help with either.

"Now all we can do is only to wait for them to blossom faster……Kuro Usagi must also put in her utmost effort to complete her mission……"

"Yahoo~~~!"

---*Bam!* At that moment, Kuro Usagi heard a childish voice and what seemed to be a head of a small child slamming into her from behind.

And following that, they fell.

"……Eh? EYa… ahhhh!"

"Waaaaahhhhhhhhh! ♪"

The leaves and branches rustled and snapped as the two of them tumbled down. Fortunately for those obstacles, they had only fallen a few ways down before coming to a stop. But the current moment did not allow room for such nonsense and moreover, there could only be one Baka who would do such a stupid thing at this time. Kuro Usagi was so angry that her rabbit ears couldn't stop quivering as she spun around to shout at the person behind her:

"SHI…SHIROYASHA-SAMA! Since you've already arrived, you should have immediately gone to clean up all those unruly criminals---"

"Wow~! Wow~! Wow~! It's…It's a real moon rabbit desu! And those are rabbit ears too! A petite appearance, innocent, tough and unyielding character and also the symbol of selflessness in their dedicated tasks! It's my first time seeing one!♪"

"---…Eh…."

……who is she? Kuro Usagi thought silently to herself.

A black-haired teenage girl whom she haden't seen before had just attacked her. Kuro Usagi had originally been stunned motionless at the same spot due to this unexpected turn of events but her rabbit ears soon turned red as she felt a pair of small hands rubbing at her breasts and she quickly tossed the girl in panic.

"Hm….Swish!~"

"Aya~!"

The mysterious girl was tossed spinning into the crown of the Great Tree.

Pulling out her [Vajra Replica], Kuro Usagi accosted the girl:

"You… Who are you?! For you to be able to get that close to Kuro Usagi's back…… what kind of trick did you use?"

"Even if you put it that way, I do not know how to answer that for I had just simply leaned closer to you."

The black-haired girl had tilted her head in a cutesy manner and didn't seem to be lying about it.

And that only made Kuro Usagi heighten her vigilance against the girl.

"……Are you our enemy?"

"Nn, that's right." The black-haired girl replied with a radiant smile.

In a flash, lightning surrounded the crown of the tree.

The [Vajra Replica] was crackling intensely as Kuro Usagi took hold of the spear shaped out of the holy lightning to make a direct shot at the girl. The waves of heat and sparks that swirled around the lightning spear had also set the water tree leaves that held large amounts of water aflame and the surroundings had changed into a sea of flames in an instant.

That was a strike that didn't leave any doubts about the result.

Though it wasn't in her nature to act first without further talk, but Kuro Usagi felt that it wasn't the time to fret about this sort of minor details. For that girl to appear before her at this sort of time, she wouldn't be someone that could be counted as a small fry.

While adjusting the intensity of the lightning to prevent the fire from spreading further to the other tree leaves, Kuro Usagi seemed rather worn out as she turned away with a sigh:

"……Even though it's not the time to play with little kids, I've still held back……"

"---Is that so? Well then, I will play my cards seriously from now too."

Kuro Usagi had only managed to turn her head slightly when she caught sight of the eight daggers that were rapidly approaching her after being thrown.

You must be lying right?

It was already impossible to dodge them all and Kuro Usagi had to release some holy lightning from her [Vajra Replica] to deflect the daggers.

Even then, it wasn't enough with just that for two daggers that seemed to hunger for a layer of her chest and her belly respectively had to be dodged by her by spinning to the side. And despite dodging them all, the speed of the daggers was still pretty impressive.

Not only being successful in sneaking up from behind and withstanding the lightning attack from [Vajra Replica]……and to follow up with an attack on Kuro Usagi……!

Facing this enemy whose powers were unknown even if one were to judge by her appearance, Kuro Usagi couldn't help but feel the trickle of cold sweat on her back.

On the contrary, the girl---Rin's eyes were sparkling as she appraised Kuro Usagi with a look of admiration.

Impressive! I didn't expect her to dodge that with that kind of reflex and in that sort of timing!

The daggers had been thrown by her with the certainty that they would hit their target who wouldn't be able to dodge in time, but Kuro Usagi had surpassed her expectations by escaping without a single scrape.

Rin had actually thought that Kuro Usagi wasn't much of an opponent for she made such a rudimentary mistake of facing ones back to an opponent, but in that next moment, her belittlement had changed to envy.

"As expected of a [Highborn of Little Garden]. That was quite admirable."

"……you took the words out of Kuro Usagi's mouth. What kind of trick did you use just now?"

“Secret♪. But since Usagi-san is so kawaii, I will be willing to tell you the answer if you guess close enough!”

Rin raised her right hand to swear by it.

Was that a show of confidence? Or was that just a playful action meant to provoke?

Kuro Usagi judged the distance between them seriously but Rin just smiled wryly as she said:

“Just saying in advance, my mission is just to stop Usagi-san”

“……?”

“Because… isn’t it Usagi-san’s mission to shoot down [The Death Eye of Balor]? If you were to succeed, it would really be quite troublesome for us. So, I’ve come to stop you.” As Rin honestly made her intent clear, a low rolling rumble came from the ground in the South-eastern plains that didn’t seem to be from the army of Titans nor was it the roar of Deen as it displayed its overwhelming might.

But it was one that was much heavier and lower in intonation. Seeming like the sound of a huge sized earthworm squirming around in the ground. “This kind of feeling…..Could …Could that be Demon Lord Balor?”

“Mhm. You’ve guessed it right. I actually thought that we would only use the Demonic Eye…… but I didn’t expect to find such a use to the [Book of Invasions] as well.”

Kuro Usagi’s face turned pale instantly.

[The Book of Invasions] was one of the [Authority of Host Master]s that the Titan tribes had fought over, ten years prior and now it’s said to be in the hands of the

enemy. Kuro Usagi immediately perked up her rabbit ears to listen and scout out the situation on the ground.

There should be someone near [Underwood] that is holding this summoning ritual!

As she collected the information with her ears, Kuro Usagi's worst fears were confirmed.

At the South-eastern plains where the [Draco Greif] Alliance and the Titan tribes were locked in a fierce fight---a woman in long robes was starting up the summoning ritual before an open grimoire at a position behind the armies.

Without a doubt, that would be the same witch who had kidnapped Leticia.

"---Uu…… Kuro Usagi won't let you succeed in that……!"

If Demon Lord Balor were to be summoned in addition to the huge dragon that was already in the skies, it would definitely spell the end of the Participants. Hence, Kuro Usagi started to dash forward in a hurry with the agility and speed like that of an escaping rabbit.

However, she soon drew a sharp intake of breath as she noticed a shadow of a person keeping up with her pace, running shoulder to shoulder with her.

"Usagi-san, I won't let you get there you know?"

Rin drew a dagger from its leather sheath to throw it at Kuro Usagi. Kuro Usagi who had rapidly descended in her leap managed to retain her balance as she made a side-leap to avoid the attack of the dagger.

Following that, she gave a harder kick to leap up with all her might.

Even so, Rin was still able to block her path by appearing before Kuro Usagi.

No way…This must be a lie right?!

Kuro Usagi leapt once more to the side to try circle around the obstacle that was Rin. But Rin continued to shadow her moves completely and while maintaining a distance that couldn't be called too far nor could it be called too near as she threw her daggers for the third time.

The daggers that came from the front this time round were also successfully dodged by Kuro Usagi once more. Although the daggers might be travelling at a fast speed, it still didn't reach the extent of being too fast to be dodged. The dagger narrowly passed Kuro Usagi's body and clattered to the ground behind her.

Kuro Usagi had also released some lightning from her [Vajra Replica] to return fire at her opponent but with a wave of Rin's arm, the lightning had disappeared before reaching their target. So Kuro Usagi decided to make a call not to get close to her enemy and conclude it to be a dangerous zone as she fired her lightning attacks from a distance, despite knowing nothing of the other's Gift.

This sort of attack and defending battle continued for five more times and Kuro Usagi was still unable to figure out anything on Rin's Gift.

---But, things aren't going to go well if this is to drag on any longer.

Kuro Usagi stopped her running and seeming to pray silently, she steeled her determination---and raised her [Vajra Replica]

"Though it's a pity to destroy such a great talent such as you……but please meet your end here!"

Kuro Usagi's hair seemed to be ablaze as it went through a dramatic change while she lifted the [Vajra Replica] high above her head.

---The legacy of the [Moon Rabbit] that jumped into the fire in self-sacrifice. Due to the divine power given to the descendants for their merit being released, Kuro Usagi's black hair started to take on a lotus red glow that seemed to give it the illusion of being ablaze.

The blue lightning that buzzed around the weapon gradually changed to become a reddish lightning wreathed in flames.

The [Vajra Replica] was now charged with a power that could devastate the entire plains and Kuro Usagi raised it in an underhand grip---

"Release of Mock Divinity……Pierce it! [Vajra Replica]---!"

And the holy lightning wreathed in lotus red flames shot out towards Rin.

The tip of the red lightning had condensed to become a sharp tip, causing the entire Vajra to become that of a flaming red spear.

This was a Divine Gift that could only be used once with the price of burning up its entire existence. And that was the true power hidden behind the third Gift that had been given to Kuro Usagi---[Vajra Replica].

Clouds of dust had been whipped up in huge waves that drove in waves along the ground as the condensed energies of the [Vajra Replica] was released upon impact.

---With that, Kuro Usagi was very confident that it would surely finish off the opponent.

Although she did not understand what Gift that black-haired girl might have used to get rid of the lightning earlier, but with this kind of attack, she shouldn't be able to make it disappear.

Relaxing her shoulders, Kuro Usagi tried to catch her breath but soon got it under control as she looked at the cloud of dust with a contorted expression.

"---To actually try demolishing the entire plain with that kind of explosion? Usagi-san sure does things the dramatic and overwhelming way huh?"

"……"

This was the worst case scenario as a girl's silhouette could be seen faintly in the cloud of dust and smoke.

"And to make sure that I won't dodge the attack, you actually chose to attack while lining me in the middle between the ritual and yourself……Hm. That's quite a cool and collected thinking. Seems to me that Usagi-san is much better than the rumors."

As the dust and smoke resided, Kuro Usagi was surprised once more.

For Rin was standing nonchalantly at her original spot without a slightest scratch on her body.

On the other hand, the spot that the impact was supposed to detonate at was only able to cause an effect of just dust and smoke clouds.

This….This isn't a barrier, nor is it a power to dissipate energy……

The heat and energy released just now wasn't something that could be ignored. If it were the dissipation of energy, it shouldn't be only at the extent of causing clouds of dust and smoke to swirl.

If it weren't using a similar amount of energy to counter it or a rapid construction of a huge wall to block it, it shouldn't be the current situation that she saw before her.

"Oh well, let's continue. I'm also quite fired up now. If you don't hurry, the ritual will be completed too you know?"

"…Uu…"

The girl smiled happily.

And it was then that Kuro Usagi noticed the flaw in her thoughts---

This girl's a strong opponent. If she couldn't find a way to overcome her, there would be no stopping the ritual that was in progress.

Part 5

---South-eastern Plains, [Underwood].

The fight with the Titan tribes could be described as a one-sided massacre.

The black winds wielded by Percher were especially effective in situations where the enemies were numerous for she toppled the Titans one after another like a sickle to a bunch of wheat. Even if there were a few scattered Titans that managed to break through her line of defense to the back of the lines, Asuka and Deen would also synchronize their attacks to whack them to the ground.

The combination team of Asuka and Deen would have been in a sticky situation if they were to be surrounded. But so long as the enemy continued to trickle from the front, it didn't matter how many enemies there were for it just didn't pose a problem to them.

And it was just moments before that Deen had pinned another Titan to the ground while giving a loud roar:

"DEEEEEEEEeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEN!"

"Thanks for the good job here. With this, the last defense should be almost cleaned up by now right?"

"---Asuka! There's still one more heading towards you……" Sala who descended from the sky shouted towards Asuka.

Just as Sala had warned, a Titan holding a spear and heavy metal chains was rushing towards them. Deen rapidly raised its right arm but was slow by a beat as the chains snaked around it, locking it down and causing it to be dulled in its movements.

Next, the Titan proceeded to aim his spear at Asuka with his other hand.

“Irk…Irksome!”

Asuka raised up her Hand of Ruby that Sala had given to her.

But before she could act, a flash of light sliced the spear head off its shaft.

“Eh……?”

“DEEEEEEEEeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEN!”

Asuka was still in her bewilderment while Deen grabbed and smashed the Titan’s head into the ground. After giving it two or three hard knocks, the Titan lost all signs of resistance as it lay quietly on the ground. Although Asuka was still surprised by the strange snapping of the spear tip just now, she decided to give the priority of her focus to Sala who had descended.

“Sala, you’re back so early?”

“Sorry. Our party to invade the citadel was confronted by a Demon Lord and we had no choice but to retreat. Currently, it’s just that lad……Izayoi and Gry against the enemy.”

“Is that so? But if Izayoi-san is there, there’s nothing to worry anymore. Well then, Sala, care to join me in the battle against the Titans?” Asuka didn’t mind Sala’s choice of retreating in that situation but had coolly extended her invitation to Sala to fight alongside as comrades.

Feeling surprised though still feeling a little guilty, Sala asked:

"……You aren't angry with me? I had promised to save your comrade but in the end, I've just dumped the task to your other comrade who's now battling in the skies."

"Well, you can put it that way, but the person we are talking about is Izayoi-san right? Then that's nothing to worry about anymore. In fact, he would have said something haughty like 'I'll stay behind, you guys get out of the way by returning to the ground' or something along those lines right?"

Hmph! Asuka said it in a displeased tone. Although it was really infuriating, Asuka herself was one of the people who was being protected by Izayoi in that way too and it didn't take much to guess Izayoi's course of action in an emergency.

Seeing Asuka's reaction, Sala gave a wry smile as she replied teasingly:

"Looks like you trust him a lot."

"It's limited to Gift Games only……Compared to that, was it you who saved me just now?"

"No, it wasn't me. That arrow must have been shot over from Faceless who's battling over there."

Asuka turned to look at the direction where Sala was pointing.

Before her eyes, Asuka could see a litter of Titan corpses heaping the ground around Faceless who was fighting quite a distance away. And it would seem that she picked off all the Titans that tried to invade from the sides that was beyond the effective range of Percher's black winds of death.

She who was at the frontlines to be able to aim at a point in the last line of defense and slice off a spear tip cleanly with her arrow was truly an incredible display of technique.

“You just said ‘That arrow’……she used a bow?”

“Yes. It sure is something for her to shoot her target from such a distance.”

Asuka who had asked in surprise, turned to look at Faceless once more.

To deal with the Titans that had escaped from the black winds of death, Faceless would pick them off with a bow taken out from her Gift card.

And when the enemies manage to survive the rain of arrows, she would then switch to a sword and unleash the bladed whip mechanism hidden in the Serpent belly sword to slice them down.

And when there were some lucky enough to escape the sword dance, two spears would then pierce through their bodies.

---the continuous switch of weapons from the Gift card.

Depending on the distance and the situation, whether it was long-ranged, mid-ranged or close ranged, choosing the Gift best suited to defeat the enemy and to push the battle towards a favorable tide. That was the battle strategy of Faceless.

“Bow and arrows, the Serpent belly sword and the two long spears. Utilizing weapons that suit the needs of the situation with a switch between the weapons is one of the most common techniques, but it’s my first time witnessing a warrior with such a flawless control in the transitions too. And she’s still holding back her true strength in battle which is the scariest thing to note.”

Sala watched on in admiration.

Regarding Faceless and her completely calculated battle dance---Honestly speaking, Asuka was also entranced by it.

Flexibly alternating……according to the situation……

For some unknown reason, that sort of battle tactic seemed to interest Asuka.

“But, we cannot lose to her either. The back has been cleaned of enemies and we should also move to the frontlines.”

“Ah. Mhm. Got it. If things continue the way it is, we should be able to drive them--”

---Just then, the sound of harp-strings started to reverberate in the air. The two of them who had been quite fired up in their fighting spirits had stopped their conversation as they looked towards the enemy’s lines in recognition of the sound. For that had belonged to the [Golden Harp] which caused much confusion in the previous battles.

The two of them exchanged a knowing look.

The main force of the enemy has made its move.

“We are finally entering the climax of the battle. Do you know what the Gift of the enemy can do?”

“Nn. I remember that it’s a harp capable of creating confusion in the minds of others and summon fog……am I right?”

“No. What it controls isn’t only limited to fogs. I did a little research on it after it was snatched from them and found that it used to belong to one of the elder gods of

the Celtic group of gods. A Harp that had a rich and long history in addition to the divine powers that reside in it. The powers include the control of emotions, lulling people to sleep and the control of weather. With the skies already covered with dark thunder clouds, it would be troublesome if lightning were to be summoned. So better keep an eye out for any signs of trouble."

"Is that so? That sounds like a large range for its usage... But if you have discovered it to that extent, why did you allow it to be taken back by the enemy? Shouldn't that be unexplainable by a mere excuse of forgetfulness?"

Uu Sala pouted as she turned away her embarrassed face.

"Yes…It's indeed my fault for letting the enemy get the harp back. So I intend to return the shame to them tenfold from now on."

"Is that so? Well, you will just have to make sure that I don't snatch that glory all for myself." Asuka replied teasingly, causing Sala to sulk in silence.

And while the two of them exchanged words, the battle at the front lines was starting to develop in a dramatic direction.

Part 6

---[Underwood]'s South-eastern plains, At the frontlines.

Percher continued to whip up black winds that smashed the enemies to the ground but she soon found it to be a boring task. Although she was fine physically due to the elemental advantage she had over the opponents, but this sort of repeated action lacked the factor that would have made it interesting.

If it were to continue this way, this would really make the fight with Asuka so much more enjoyable! As Percher thought of that wryly, she continued to advance deeper into the heart of the enemy's army. And as she passed, Titans who were touched by her black winds continued to fall to the ground stricken with disease, without any exceptions.

The battlefield had rapidly become a stage where she performed alone. And seeming to mock her haughtiness, the golden melody started to fill the air.

Scrunching her brows in displeasure, Percher turned her gaze towards the heart of the enemy's forces.

This is the melody from before?

She had heard of this information from before but she now understood as she felt it for herself. The already low fighting spirit that she had was almost gone as well……but in fact, without listening to this melody, her fighting spirit would have decreased too.

But no matter what the case was for her, it was clear that the enemy was trying to control the mood in the battle field.

The Titans who have been wasted away by the disease and almost reaching the stage of becoming corpses were starting to struggle to their feet under the control of the melody.

(Hm……Controlling the mood of the battle field and forcing a race to do battle. That sure is distasteful. It's as if the Titan tribes are just one of the extra chess pieces in their hands.)

Percher had completely lost her fighting spirit by now, but the despicable method of the enemy had gotten on her nerves.

Giving a sidelong glance to the Pied Piper ring on her finger---

"---Okay let's do this. Although it's also infuriating to be summoned by the [No Name]s to do their work, but you guys are certainly more despicable."

Not giving the dying Titans who had struggled to their feet a second look, Percher rapidly ascended into the sky to a spot out of reach of the attack of any Titans and unleashed a strong barrage of attacks in the direction of the melody's source, striking away at the huddle of Titans in that region.

Amassing the condensed hatred and miasma formed by the eighty million resentful spirits in her hands, she maintained their stability while landing before the enemy.

The black robed female who was holding the ritual with an open [The book of Invasions] before her---Aura noticed her presence.

"Hehe. What took you so long? I've been waiting for you, [Black Percher]. Was it fun running around for the [No Name]s?"

"Yep. At least it wasn't as detestable as helping you guys."

And without further ado, Percher thrust her palms forward to release the miasma that rushed towards Aura with the screams and moans of millions of tortured souls.

However, that attack exploded a few steps before reaching Aura.

The sudden turn of events caused Percher to widen her eyes in surprise while Aura covered her mouth in a giggle.

“After leaving [The Pied Piper of Hamelin], your spiritual level seems to have fallen, hasn’t it? Despite being a vessel that holds eighty million resentful spirits, your current self is still a long way off from being at the level of a God-class spirit……Here’s this. Why not come back to our side? This time, we will prepare an excellent Gift to suit the Gift you have attained. How’s that?’

“……”

Percher maintained her nonchalant expression while keeping up with the wave of attacks.

But all these attacks exploded before Aura---No, it would be more precise to say that they have all exploded upon coming into contact with the area demarcated by the ritual’s circle. It was clearly a mechanism of some sort that had been put in place within the circle.

Aura gave a confident smile as she continued to bait Percher with her honeyed words.

“Percher. Just based on attainment alone, you do have the spiritual level sufficient to be a God-class. The number of spirits contained within you could be said to be extraordinary to the point of breaking the boundaries of the rules that govern logic. To form a new group of Gods wouldn’t be a dream for you. If you like, we can

arrange some more subordinates for you. It won't be anything like those useless demons of [The Pied Piper of Hamelin] previously---"

"---shut your trap."

A red line was traced along Aura's cheek for the magic circle that was supposed to keep out the black waves of miasma was suddenly breached. And Aura whose face continued to be covered by the long robes twitched, evidently surprised.

Her surprise wasn't as much as to the cut on her face as it was to the surge of anger that Percher had.

"……Aura. If there's even something that I have to thank you guys for, that would be for the grimoire of <The Pied Piper of Hamelin>. Just for that single point, I really do owe you guys on the account of those old times……and hence the negotiation just now would have been worth some consideration."

"……"

"But since you have trampled over such feelings today, even if [Grim Grimoire Hamelin] is one of those chess pieces that you conveniently made use of and toss aside……it's still a flag that I've betted my all upon and a Community that the members have given up their lives for."

Percher calmly rebuked Aura while clenching her right hand, feeling the ring of the pied piper digging into her flesh.

---She was originally a group of evil spirits that had no connection with [The Pied Piper of Hamelin]. But to allow her to reappear after being separated from [The Pied Piper of Hamelin], this ring was the weak medium that enabled her to do so.

But this is also the wish of Percher herself.

When she was summoned once more to Little Garden, she had brought up a condition for her subordination---

“For remembrance of the two comrades who have died for the ambitions of [Black Death Demon Lord], I don’t care how or what sort of way it is but I wish to retain the flag of [Grim Grimoire Hamelin].”

---Of course, she didn’t deserve that sort of privilege.

Having disrupted the peace as a Demon Lord and having lost to others, why should she get this sort of freedom to choose?

But Shiroyasha had listened to her stubborn request when she was summoned into Little Garden for the second time and given her the hope in her rebirth. The ring with the symbol of the pied piper was now the proof of her subordination contract.

“To insult my comrades is equivalent to insulting my flag---Hence as of today, I will sever all ties with you guys and what’s left for us will be an all-out bloodlust for each other’s lives, you old witch.”

“…Is that so? Well, that’s really a pity.”

Aura gave a sigh as she drooped her shoulders, seemingly sad about the loss.

And happening around that time, Asuka, Deen and Sala and the many Eudemons and beastmen of the [Draco Greif] Alliance who have caught up…broke through into the heart of the enemy’s army and arrived before Aura.

“Good work, Percher.” Asuka said while giving her a sidelong glance.

“No problem. But we haven’t tied up the situation as of yet.”

The gaze of everyone present were riveted onto Aura.

Being the representative, Sala took a step forward to advise Aura to surrender.

“The Titans have already been completely annihilated by us. Even if you continue to control their fighting spirits to force them to do battle, what’s close to dying will be dead anyways and won’t put up much of a fight. It's best to surrender quietly and come into our custody.”

With that, Sala drew her sword to signal the end of the negotiations.

Aura had lost her Titan army and was surrounded but a smile of disappointment continued to linger at ther lips.

Percher heightened her alertness as she warned Asuka and Sala:

“Guys, you would want to be careful now. This woman is a similar sort of Eudemon like the Titans, a humanoid sort---generally termed as a [Sorcerer].”

“……Sorcerer? Is it the kind of sorcerer that are told of in stories?”

“Yes. There’s quite a number of classical examples for them too and these sort of people are also termed as [Fay], equivalent to the roots of the term [Faerie](Fairy) that are of a species close to extinction. The more prominent examples would be the [Lady of the Lake] in the stories of [King Arthur], MorganleFay; and the FairyGodmother of [Cinderella] etc. The highest order in the realm of human species.”

“Oh my, you exposed everything about me. But shouldn’t this be something that should have been told to them before the battle?”

"Do I need to repeat myself? Up till just moments ago, I still felt that I've owed you guys a little….And moreover, Jin, the little red girl, Freak boy and Freak Usagi seemed to have arrived at some sort of agreement to not ask or listen to me. Wouldn't it be stranger to talk about morality and fairness in that situation?"

Percher simply stated it matter-of-factly as she gazed at the army of [Underwood] around her.

Jin who was also observing the battlefield through Percher's senses gave an involuntary shudder.

……Peeping-tom.

No…It's not it---

Percher thought in her mind, and as it happens, Jin also gave a quick reply to that.

So that's how it is. Having synchronized their senses, they could also communicate telepathically? Percher smiled devilishly as she realized that she found something interesting. Percher who was in a good mood after a discovery of such a useful material for her future pranks, turned her gaze back to Aura once more---

"Well then, let's end things here, Aura. For you, I can give you a special discount now. So long as you beg me to spare your life, I can help you negotiate to be collared up, given three meals and allow you to be a maid."

"……"

Hearing Percher's words, Aura wiped all emotions from her face and swept her gaze around the army that surrounded her as she muttered in a low voice:

"……Percher, do you know why the Titans have such a vulnerability to the Black Death disease?"

"Hah?"

"That's because there was a Titan with overwhelming power who controlled the other Titans. The [System of control based on the manipulation of Black Death disease] is a curse of the Titans that gave you the advantage---but if you look at it from a different perspective, there should also be the [Titans that controlled Black Death to enslave the other Titan tribes] right?"

"……what?" A collective gasp in response came from the [Underwood] army.

Snapping [The book of Invasions] shut, Aura reached her hand towards [The Death Eye of Balor] that was positioned within the ritual grounds.

Not knowing what she was up to, Percher raised her brows at that movement.

And at the recesses of her mind, Jin's sudden cry jolted through her.

Percher! Defeat her now! Quickly!

Huh?

We have fallen for her ploy! It's Balor! The person whom she said to have created the [System of enslavement through Black Death], it's the tribe led by Balor himself! The enemy's true aim might just be……

Jin's reminder had also caused Percher to notice something amiss and she turned to look back at the Titans who have been defeated by the Black Death Disease.

However, Aura had already raised [The Death Eye of Balor] and said her last words in a mocking tone---

“Farewell~[Black Death Demon Lord]! The guys from the [Draco Greif] Alliance and the others! Your little oversight shall be your downfall!”

In a flash, [The Death Eye of Balor] emitted a Black ray that swept through the entire battlefield.

Sala and the others who had already mentally prepared themselves before the death ray bathed across them were shocked to find that they were unharmed and nothing was out of the ordinary.

Unable to comprehend the situation, the people of [Underwood] were looking at each other in confusion. But in the next moment---

"---Gahouhouhouhouhouhouhouhouhouhouhou----!"

The Titans’ roars surrounded them as they were released from the holds of the Black Death disease.

Part 7

---[Underwood], South-eastern Plains.

Beads of perspiration reflected light off Kuro Usagi's forehead as she ran around the battlefield.

Having lost her [Vajra Replica], she only had two equipment-typed Gifts remaining that are of [Mahabharata Papers].

And the use of these Gifts carried a huge amount of risk.

The other time was only because Asuka-san was around to help …… but it would be too dangerous to allow this girl to get close to Asuka-san!

For the black-haired girl was still chasing Kuro Usagi from behind.

That girl---Rin's agility could be said to match up with Kuro Usagi or Izayoi. But since Izayoi was in the midst of an aerial battle, the only other person who could delay this enemy would be Kuro Usagi.

She who continued to throw daggers that maintained sufficient speed to hit Kuro Usagi never seemed to change the distance between them as she continued to shadow at that 'not too far and not too near' distance.

And there's still that light just now……It should be safe to presume that [The Death Eye of Balor] has been released! Although the main body hasn't been summoned, but it must surely be one of the trump cards of the enemy! No matter what, Kuro Usagi must summon her holy spear and pull away from this girl…!

"As the Titans who have been defeated by Black Death were revived one after another, Kuro Usagi really wanted to rush to aid the others in the battlefield but this girl just couldn't stop pestering her……

"Your concentration seems to be wavering, Usagi-san! ♪" And as Rin spoke, she threw a number of daggers at her.

Kuro Usagi had already lost count on the number of times this 'attack and defend' kind of game had gone for---Suddenly, all the daggers were cut down by the sharp edge of a certain Serpent belly sword.

"Wa……!"

"NO WAY!"

Klunk Chink! The sound of metal sliding back into position after knocking the daggers on the floor hovered in the air. And a masked Knight---Faceless had gotten between them.

Turning her head , she said to Kuro Usagi:

"---I've come to take over the battle on this side. Please go to stop [The Death Eye of Balor]."

"……Thanks for the timely intervention! Kuro Usagi will be leaving it to you!"

Yeah right, there's still her around. Kuro Usagi started to dash towards the battlefield while thanking the skies for such a timely help.

Wanting to chase Kuro Usagi who had dashed off like a fleeing rabbit, Rin found herself blocked by Faceless.

Rin frowned as she stared at Faceless.

"You seem to be one of the favored ones of [Queen Halloween] right? Could it be that you've gotten the orders to defeat us?"

"No. That's not my goal this time. I've purely come for the sake of friendship."

Rin blinked her eyes in disbelief, seeming to doubt the things that she heard.

"Friend…Friendship? The favored ones of [Queen Halloween] needing friendship?"

"Yes. I've been invited over here as a guest of [Will-O'-Wisp] and it's because of such friendship that I've entered this battlefield."

In other words, it was purely coincidence that she met the Demon Lord. Hearing her monotonous voice that gave such an honest answer, it caused Rin to feel a little sorry for her and not know how to respond to that.

Faceless maintained her serious attitude while keeping her favorite Serpent belly sword.

"And if I wanted to defeat you, it wouldn't be possible with my current equipment. So I hope that you will stop before we both get seriously hurt."

"……eh? You know what I'm doing?"

Faceless gave a slight inclination of her head---

"Although I'm not clear on what the technique is based on, but……according to my conjecture, what you are manipulating is the [Distance] between objects right." Faceless stated it plainly.

And this time, Rin was finally surprised.

Her child-like eyes grew as round as saucers and she fumbled with the daggers in her hands that almost fell to the ground.

“Um…that…How did you know that? Was it that obvious? What kind of mistake did I do?”

“No. Nothing that obvious. Just that I noticed the trajectory of the dagger, immediately falling to the ground after passing Kuro Usagi narrowly and it just didn’t seem right to me…… Since the speed and the distance of the throw didn’t seem to match up, your technique should either be the manipulation of time or distance.”

Faceless continued to state in her monotonous voice.

But even if she knew of the type of Gift, there was no counter for it. Attacks towards Rin wouldn’t be [Unable to deal a fatal blow] or [Unable to pierce] but [Unable to reach].

From a perspective of looking at it, this could be said to be a Gift more troublesome than being unable to die. There were killers in Little Garden that were natural counters for those that couldn’t die and there were also weapons that could pierce through miracles. But if all these were to be unable to reach the opponent, all that would have been pointless.

“For the Titan tribes who had set up their encampment far away to appear in this region, could also be explained by such a power and to defend against the lightning of [Vajra Replica] and [Indra’s Spear Vajra] as well. All of those can be blocked if I were to factor it in as a huge [Wall of distance] between you guys.”

“……”

"According to my knowledge, this would really be one of the unique Gifts that have no equal. But if this is the result of the combination of the ideologies of [Maxwell's demons] and [Laplace Demons], such a thing wouldn't be inconceivable."

"……Hm, that can be said as the correct answer, Masked talkative Onee-san."

Rin shrugged her shoulders while smiling sarcastically.

Faceless tilted her head while raising a brow.

"So what do you want to do now? Still want to fight?"

"……No. Although you do seem interesting, but I guess I will just retreat here today. After all, I did delay the time and it sure is too early to make an enemy out of [Queen Halloween]."

"Wise choice. No matter what you may do, this game is soon coming to an end already."

"Eh?" Rin tilted her head quizzically.

Looking up towards the Sun that was obscured by the thick thunderclouds, Faceless said:

"Shiroyasha had returned the Divinity to the Buddhist faction just now."

"……You're lying!"

"It's true. I guess she just didn't want to repeat her stupidity of three years ago once more. With things the way it is, the Demon Lord that you guys sent to that area will soon be similar to a lone candle standing in the wind and this little commotion here will soon come to a close with her arrival as well."

Faceless announced in a calm and steady voice.

Rin had a bitter expression as she looked up to the skies before disappearing from the battlefield without a trace.

Looking steadily at the battlefield thrown into confusion once more due to the resurrected Titans, Faceless gave a long sigh before muttering softly: “I guess it’s time for me to go too. I will leave the rest to you, Jack.”

Following that, Faceless left the battlefield like the dispersal of mist. The spot where the two had originally stood at was now trampled over by the Titan tribes and all traces of them had also disappeared like a wisp of smoke in the wind.

Interlude 8

Part 1

---In the skies of [Underwood], 3000 meters up.

Sparks flew with the violent clash of metals while a pair of wings continued to weave a quick pattern in the air.

The battle between Leticia and the Gryphon was still playing out in the air. The Gryphon being the Lord of the Skies but the enemy was one that possessed Divinity. Possessing more than just the upper hand in agility, Leticia also possessed the Gift to create a countless number of weapons that could be fired repeatedly from the Dragon's shadow. Izayoi had been knocking away the spears with his trident all this time but he could see that it would be an uphill task to land on the Citadel judging by the current situation.

Gry temporarily descended and pulled away but did not take his eyes off Leticia as he stared at the figure with growing frustration at the current predicament.

"Damn it! What the hell is that guy?! There's completely no flaw in the defense for me to make a landing!"

"Yeah. Although that thing doesn't chase us when we draw away from the Citadel and maintain our distance, it actually makes the situation trickier. The specialized guard is much tougher than I thought."

They had tried nearing and backing away, soaring from left to right to try to bait the guard away but it would seem that the shadow of Leticia wasn't one to jump for the bait. Izayoi had actually planned to just leap into the Citadel and get things settled

in the straightforward fashion, but he had decided to leave off that thought after considering the high risks.

“I’m really at my wits end. Is this what they call exhausting all options?”

“Oi! This isn’t the time to be joking man, you stupid lad!”

Gry chided in reply while Izayoi shrugged his shoulders at that. But it was true that the battle this time was one that really gave him much headaches.

In addition to it being his first aerial battle riding on another’s back, he was also wielding a weapon that he was unaccustomed to. Hence his predicament was still within the confines of being understandable.

In his world, though he had experience with using a gun out of mercy, swords or even weapons of the pole-arm varieties were totally new to him. And for Izayoi who had always welcomed the challenge which he went to fight with just his fists alone, the aerial battle of today would really be a bad disadvantage for him since the very beginning.

“……As long as we can successfully land on the Citadel, we can solve the problem but for now, we can only continue to spar with her. So I’ll apologize in advance for I’ll need to trouble you to make preparations for a long drawn out battle.”

Izayoi raised his trident and swept it back in a swing while Gry gave a grunt in response.

They were both reviewing their next strategy when a brilliant light from below halted their train of thoughts.

The light was so intense that it illuminated the far end of the skies for miles around.

Gry's face immediately became ashen.

"That's ……[The Ray of Balor]……?"

"……Are you sure about that?"

"Mhm…Yeah. That's the same ray that I've witnessed ten years ago. Could it be that the enemy has used [The Death Eye of Balor] already…?"

Gry was so shaken by shock that he did not even bother to hide it. For he who had witnessed the events of that day would surely understand the full meaning behind the fear of [The Ray of Balor] that brought death to all that it touched.

All trace of amusement had also been wiped off Izayoi's face as he loosened his hold on the reins while declaring:

"……Looks like we will be leaving it here."

"What do you suggest? Are we going to support the rest on the ground?"

"No, you are free to go there alone for I will just try my luck at jumping to the Citadel."

Izayoi stood up on the saddle and started to judge the distance between him and the Ancient Vampire Citadel.

And that caused Gry to be alarmed.

"No, Wait! Didn't you say that the risk was too great and decided to abandon that idea earlier?"

"Yep. It's much easier to target a person jumping in mid-air and there's no certainty that no other defensive measures have been placed around the Ancient Citadel

……but since there's no other method currently, I just have to give up the thought of landing with my body unhurt."

"That's why I said to give it some time right---?"

"It's precisely because we do not have that luxury anymore that I made this decision. Since the enemy have already used [The Death Eye of Balor], it would mean that they plan to finish things up in the cease-fire period. And that would just mean more danger for Kasukabe and the others who are in the Citadel."

Gry couldn't help but to draw a sharp intake of breath upon hearing that for the possibility was indeed quite high.

"That's why I've decided to sneak into the Citadel of the enemy to meet up with Kasukabe and the others and confirm their safety. And after telling them the conditions to clear the game, I will take a somersault back to land as that will be for the best arrangement."

"But if you are injured, wouldn't all our efforts just now go to waste?!"

"Nope, it's fine. As long as I have my limbs attached, it won't be a problem. With a good sleep and sufficient nourishment, I will be as good as new."

Izayoi laughed loudly as he lowered his stance in preparation for a jump.

"……as for those guys down there, I'll be leaving them to you. Though Ochibi-sama might say 'Leave it to me', but he's still a small lad who hasn't matured fully. So before I get back, please help me to look after them." Added Izayoi in a serious tone as his muscles had already wound up for the leap.

"…Uu…"

Hearing those words, Gry finally understood that Izayoi already had it in his mind all along.

This guy had intended right from the start ……to solve everything on his own.

Rescuing the comrades who have been imprisoned above, solving the difficult mystery of the Game's riddle, defeating the main culprits of the enemy and last but not least, to defeat the Demon Lord.

To accomplish all these alone. If it were words that came from another's mouth, it might have been taken as a joke that would invite mockery……but for this guy, it might just be possible.

And precisely due to the ray of hope that could be seen from this guy---Gry steeled his resolve.

"……I won't agree to that request."

"What? Why?"

"Didn't that lad tell you to leave it to him? And if you had agreed to leave it to him only to send him support later, that can be seen as a kind of betrayal to the resolve of your comrade."

"Ah, no, that's not what I meant---"

"The same goes for me. I've already told you that I'd become your legs and wings in this battle didn't I? So, if we start talking about throwing everything into the gamble---then let's start it with mine!"

A fearsome cry marked the end of Gry's words as he proudly lifted his eagle head and shuddered as he summoned whirlwinds from the atmosphere while lunging towards the direction of the Citadel.

Izayoi who stood on the saddle had frantically grabbed the reins and tightened his grip on the trident as he shouted against the winds:

"Oi…..What are you……!"

"Here it comes, Izayoi! Get ready!"

The strong limbs of the gryphon bounded across the air as it sped on with all its might.

Leticia's shadow was expressionless as usual as it took its place to welcome them with its strikingly golden hair and jacket dancing in the wind.

The [Dragon's Remnant Shadow] seemed to pelt its relentless attacks like an intense rain as they shot towards Gryphon from all directions. This time, the number and intensity of the attacks were much different from the previous ones. In this sort of situation, even Izayoi was starting to doubt his ability to block all the attacks that would mean the difference between life and death for them both. And it was in that kind of situation that the Gryphon continued to press on towards the Citadel with only the goal in mind.

"WUUUUUAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGHHH!"

It was now just a hundred meters away from the Citadel. And in terms of a Gryphon's speed, that would be translated into a distance that would be covered within a blink of an eye. Even so, each and every attack and block with the Trident seemed to feel much longer and Izayoi did not have time to talk as he solely focused

on his task---Smacking away the attacks that seemed to grow into a torrent of black long and sharp raindrops.

The barrage of fierce attacks continued to fire from the front but Gry did not pause in his steps.

The both of them galloped to the point where they could almost touch the drop off cliff face that marked the edge of the Citadel--- Suddenly, Gry's wings were bitten off by the shadow.

"Gaargh…..!"

"GRY!"

The dark shadow spears had morphed into sharp fangs bit and chewed at Gry's wings.

Instantly, a spray of blood dyed his lion back a bright shade of red and a sharp burning pain seemed to pierce to the roots of the wings. Although suffering such a shameful wound---the loss of the Eagle wings that symbolized the Gryphon's pride, Gry continued to press on in the air.

Gripping the wind with his front talons, he propelled Izayoi and himself forward with a kick of his hind legs.

Falling into a tumble, they crash landed into the Outer wall of the Citadel where Izayoi immediately got up to carry Gry on his back while smashing through the tightly closed door with his foot to take cover inside the walls.

"You idiot……Didn't I say it from the start? What's most important is to have our body intact!"

"…Don't… Don't mind it… The hope that are carried by my…my wings are incomparable to that of your hands and legs. I think it should be clear who here is more likely to be able to save [Underwood]."

For [Underwood], just a pair of wings would be a good sacrifice---Gry who had beads of cold sweat beading his body continued to smile as he said those words.

Izayoi clicked his tongue in irritation as he took off his school jacket to tourniquet Gry's wing. Having been torn at its sleeves and now torn up some more to create a makeshift bandage, it would seem that there won't be a possibility of him wearing it ever again.

"Oh darn. That's the only set of clothing that I have you know? How are you going to pay for that eh?" Izayoi continued to click his tongue in displeasure.

"Well, that's really unfortunate……"

Gry breathed heavily as he forced a wry smile.

Izayoi who had finished with the bandaging looked from a crevice in the ruins to scout the situation outside and managed to catch sight of Leticia's shadow framed in the skies.

"……she's searching for us."

"Is that so?.....Well, I will hide while you search out Yō and the others---"

"No. There's a change of plans…… It's all the fault of some idiot that gave me a reason to defeat her."

"What?" Gry asked in disbelief.

Izayoi ignored the question as he left the ruins with eyes filled with rage.

With a leap, Izayoi stood on the Outer wall of the Citadel and looked down upon the Citadel.

……is this what they term as [Glories of ancient battles becoming just another pipedream]? But talking about a Citadel of the skies, shouldn't it be a wondrous piece of ancient architecture? What's with this bleak look that doesn't seem to be worth a penny to look at?

Izayoi gave a dissatisfied sniff. Though he might rarely meet out such harsh judgement with his opinions, it was something that couldn't be helped for he was thoroughly not in the mood then and had never felt worse in his life.

In the lifespan of his seventeen years, Izayoi was sure that there wasn't anyone in his memory whom he had owed his life to and he sure didn't owe it to Canaria either.

Never did he expect to be indebted to someone so quickly after arriving in Little Garden and one that was this big too. In a sense, it sure felt like a waste.

And so Izayoi raised the Trident, battered and badly weathered down by the many blocks that he managed to knock away with ---

"I swear that I will collect the debt with interest….. YOU FAKE COPY OF LETICIA---!"

The challenge was declared with the throw that travelled faster than the Third cosmic velocity towards the Leticia Shadow.

And the shadow that suddenly detected the imminent attack spun at the last minute and narrowly missed becoming a pinned specimen on the Trident.

However, chunks of the Outer Wall were sent closely after the first attack by Izayoi's kicks.

And these were chunks that were much tougher than dealing with bullets for each and every brick like rubble were closing in at that high speed and individually packing a devastating blow with every impact. To which Leticia quickly expanded the cloak around her to form a shadow screen which she hid behind after making the judgement that such an attack was unavoidable. The sound of the explosions as they hit their mark echoed loudly but Leticia herself seemed to be unhurt.

That did not mean anything to Izayoi who was glad to have stolen her sight albeit momentarily. Clenching his right fist, he lunged towards Leticia.

Leticia continued to use the Shadow cloak to protect herself while materialising hundreds of shadow spears around it, some of which pointed towards Izayoi's direction. It was clear that she believed herself to be safe as long as she attacked all that was around her.

Even so, Izayoi leaped straight for the porcupine-looking defence that would have been a flawless attack if launched at the same time.

There was no fear in his eyes for the word 'retreat' had never been in his mind from the start. Not caring about the black spears that came flying towards him like a heavy downpour, Izayoi continued to press on in that selfless style, which was unlike his usual self as blood flowed from his cuts, to land a strike that shattered the shadow cloak.

Gry who happened to see it from the crevice was so surprised that he gave a low growl:

“That……How can it be……?!”

Witnessing Izayoi’s chain of attacks, Gry finally understood that the words declared by the boy weren’t just a stubborn steak that didn’t want to admit defeat. The words that came from his mouth ‘As long as we can successfully land on the Citadel, we can solve the problem’ was what he had just shown. For Leticia had already been successfully suppressed by him.

Grabbing Leticia by the front of her clothes to draw her out of the protection of the broken shadow cloak, Izayoi flung her into the nearest sector of the Outer Walls. The battered Leticia twitched a little after slamming into the structures before all motion ceased from her.

Izayoi caught up and straddled the figure to pin it down while staring at it with such a ferocious gleam in his eyes that Leticia couldn’t help but widen her eyes while being stumped for words---

“Caught ya……! Times up, bye now Leticia’s fake!”

Followed by a barrage of fists.

Seeming like a person out for revenge against the previous attacks he suffered, Izayoi swung his fist down repeatedly, not even allowing the tips of her hair to escape his punches. The intense concentration followed with his focused punches would have made one worry about the stability of the Citadel in fear of it collapsing under the stress he gave to it.

Displaying the vengeful spirit of returning a received punch a hundred fold to the person, he smashed the body of Leticia with a violent and cruel flurry of attacks that would have likened him to the demonic spirit Rakshasa.

---And just a minute past the start of the battle, the shadow that had the appearance of Leticia was no more to be seen.

Standing up in the huge crater that he had created, Izayoi patted the dust off his clothes---

"……Although it might have possessed Divinity, it will only be at that sort of level if it isn't the main body."

"---!"

Gry was so shocked that he couldn't close his beak. If it weren't for his back that was throbbing with pain, he would have been utterly stupefied by the sight.

And when Izayoi returned to the ruins, Gry asked awkwardly: "……Could I have done something unnecessary?"

"Hm?"

"No, to tell the truth …I just saw what you did out there and I sure didn't expect for you to be able to pin down the opponent that easily……"

Oh, you were referring about that… Izayoi frowned a little as he placed a hand on his hip.

"Nope. The words that I've said are not lies. If I were to try land on my own, it would have been a high chance for me to be knocked away to somewhere below. In fact, it

might also be likely for me to lose my limbs in the process. So… Um well…how should I say it…Yeah to be honest, you were a great help. Thank you Gry."

Izayoi rubbed at the speck of dried blood on his forehead as he thanked Gry politely.

"This is a debt that I swear to repay you. But here, let's put more pressure on that and stop the bleeding for you shall we, before we go off to find Kasukabe and the others."

"I got it……Ouch---"

Lan~tern ♪ came the sound from the entrance of the ruins to which Izayoi and Gry turned to look in surprise.

What stood there in mid-air was a puppet holding a lantern hiding behind a pillar peeking at them.

Part 2

---Ancient Vampire Citadel, Throne room of the Elliptical paths.

“---Ah….Ugh….AAaahh……!”

With a violent jerk of the body, Leticia regained her consciousness. Hot steamy sweat covered her body and her skin looked hot and flushed as a heavy sense of weariness took root in her body.

Shaking her golden hair that shone brightly with its own light, Leticia regarded her surroundings through her hazy consciousness.

“Haah… Haah…Where am I?”

The room that had no windows to illuminate it was steeped in shadows and there was only the smell unique to structures constructed out of stone masonry that stimulated her nasal cavities.

And it would seem that this was a place that she knew quite well for the smell in the room was very nostalgic.

Turning her head to give the room a sweep with her eyes, Leticia only realised where she was after making out the sparking crystals above her head.

“Elip…Elliptical Throne Room? How did I end up……”

“Ah, Leticia. You’ve awakened?”

Leticia hurriedly looked around her surroundings once more before making out the figures of Yō, Jack and Garol-dono standing beside her.

“Yō… Jack……! Eh?..... Even Garol’s here---”

"Oh, Leticia, it sure reminds me of the old times when I see you. It's been twenty years since the last time we met right?"

Garol flashed a wide smile that showed his healthy looking set of pearly white teeth. Though on her first look Leticia might not have understood the reason of Garol's presence in this place, a look at the chains holding her down to the throne seemed to have surmised everything she needed to know about the situation she was in.

"I see……I've become a Demon Lord once more, haven't I…"

Leticia muttered with a melancholic look on her face as she could now relate to the reason for the feeling of having been battered up and the soreness she now felt on her body.

That sort of battering……it would mean that someone has already defeated my shadow?

But who could that be---Although the question had just formed in her mind, Leticia immediately arrived at the answer. Or to be precise, who could it be other than that person? Having reached that conclusion, Leticia couldn't resist a slight smile even though she was in that sort of predicament.

"Come to think of it, it sure was shocking at that time when Canaria-san had said something like 'I've defeated [Demon Lord Draculea]!'. I actually thought that she had you under her contract already……"

Garol's words were hesitant before trailing away, leaving his sentence hanging and unfinished. Leticia had also bent her head as her expression grew dark.

The reason for Garol's in-depth knowledge about the happenings concerning the Vampires was all thanks to Canaria's explanation after having saved Leticia from the Citadel.

Leticia shifted on the throne as she gazed up at the ceiling---

"Due to various matters at that time, Canaria chose to let me escape this Game through the meeting of the conditions that would cause the Game to enter a [unlimited hold for the game] instead of clearing it."

"Oh so that's how it is… Then, what about Canaria-san's whereabouts? Did she also disappear without a trace three years ago?"

"Ah……Mhm Yeah. But you should know that sort of person must be enjoying herself somewhere no matter where she goes right?"

"Well, I guess that's quite true as well." Garol gave a hearty laugh at that.

Seeing his cheerful face, Leticia's expression was more melancholic than before.

"Oh……right, Garol, what are you doing here?"

"Of course it's to solve this Game of yours that I've come to this place right, Yō Ojou-chan?"

Hearing Garol call her name, Yō who was feeling and looking around the throne looked up at them.

"Nn. But we've only managed to solve the third clearing condition."

Yō went back to inspecting the throne after saying that. The floorings had already been inspected and what's left was to carefully inspect the walls of the stone room. It wasn't long after that the sound of something sinking into a depression was heard.

“Found it! Jack! Which direction did it come from?”

“Hm, I think that should be from the direction of Virgo.”

“Thank you, please bring the fragment for Virgo over here and as long as we use this point as the reference for the other twelve sectors……”

Kazhak came the sound as the piece slid into place into the depression. Leticia who didn’t know of such a mechanism in her own Castle had also widened her eyes in surprise.

“Yō……isn’t that the item that we place inside the shrines? What are you doing with……?”

“Hm? Leticia doesn’t know about the contents of the Game?” Yō gazed back at Leticia in surprise.

Leticia’s heart almost leapt out of her mouth but with things the way it is…she grudgingly conceded at the point that there wasn’t a point to keep it a secret anymore.

“Actually about this game……it’s something that I’ve asked others to construct for me and the contents of the game are totally different from the original game that had the [Authority of Host Master].”

“Is that so? Then the mechanisms in this room really isn’t related to the Game after all.” Yō said while pushing in another piece of zodiac fragment before pausing to look back at Leticia.

“Leticia, This Floating Citadel is originally a satellite---No. Hm… is a Castle that continuously revolves around the World right?”

The abruptness of the question caught Leticia off guard and her heart skipped a beat in surprise.

“Nn, yes. That’s because my race did not want to create trouble for the Phylogenetic Tree of the world and decided to observe from afar. For acts of Vampirism were also a cause for mutation in the other races.”

“Is that so? Then it would be an observatory satellite……Hm and that’s the thing that I can’t figure out.”

Kazhak The sound of the third fragment clicking into place echoed in the room.

“What I’m slotting into place currently should be the objects that allow the Vampire Citadel to fly in its actual orbit, which is also the answer obtained through the solving of the second clearing condition……the fragments of the [Celestial globe].”

At the same time that Leticia drew her breath sharply in surprise, the sound of the fourth fragment clicking into place echoed in the room.

---Let’s have a look at the third clearing condition of [SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING].

Firstly taking the words of [SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING] to apply to the idea of being in synch with the Sun’s orbit, we can follow up that thought with linking up ‘The circle of animals’ to the ‘Zodiacs’.

And from there, we can continue to grasp the meaning of ‘The broken constellations’, and the division of the Heavenly bodies by the [Twelve Zodiacs].

But if the line of thoughts were to end just there, one would end up with a strange phrase of ‘Presenting the Twelve Zodiacs’ which made little sense if we looked at it logically.

Since the clearing condition was to ‘Present the (broken fragments of the constellations)’, then the phrase of ‘broken fragments of the constellations’ should be a subtle way of hinting that it is a tangible object that can be presented to the throne.

As Yō inserted the tenth fragment, she beamed with pride as she puffed her petite chest.

“I then applied the same riddle solving method of [The PIED PIPER of HAMELIN] for this game. Just like the ‘false legend’ and ‘true legend’, something that can be ‘shattered’ and ‘raised up’. And when talking about the object of ‘the broken fragments of the constellations’ that can be ‘broken, presented’ and relating to the constellations---one can only arrive at the answer that it’s this Celestial globe.”

“Oh…my goodness, is that true…?!” Leticia gave her heart-felt exclamation upon hearing that. For she did not expect that Yō who had been distressed before the start of the Game to be able to solve the Gift Game hosted by her.

“That’s really impressive……! You really make me see you in a new light, Yō! No, my master!”

“That…that way of addressing me doesn’t feel right with me, so please do not call me that……and the reason for me being able to solve this riddle is all thanks to Garol-san, Jack and the others who have chipped in their help. And most

importantly, I had followed Izayoi's lead having seen him in the process of solving of the riddle in [The PIED PIPER of HAMELIN]."

"That's not something you should be modest about! Learning from your comrade's achievements to pave the way to yours, that's the most ideal way for the Community to progress!" Leticia was in a rare fervour as she showered praises on Yō.

Yō who always had a lonely shadow about her to be able cooperate with others to solve a Game and acknowledge having learnt from her comrade's previous success...

As the oldest member of the Community, there was nothing that could be more heart-warming than that.

(I'd only thought of them as just some problem children all this time…… but it seems that they are still growing and developing in their own ways……)

And as Leticia continued to stare at Yō, she leaned back on her throne seeming to have shed her burden from her shoulders as she felt comforted at the thought that the impression which she had on the first meeting with them wasn't wrong after all. For as long as these three were around, she could safely leave the Community to them. Leticia tilted her head up as she let out a long breath.

Seeming to be embarrassed by the praises, Yō scratched her head before reaching out with the twelfth fragment.

"And this is the last piece."

"Yahoho! With that, the game will be cleared!"

Yō nodded her head as she slotted the fragment into the mechanism in the wall. With a sound of *Kazhak* that echoed in the room, it clicked into place before silence greeted them---

"……"

"……"

"……?"

But, nothing happened.

"…….eh?"

Yō's face was pale as blood seemed to drain out of it. Could it be that the reasoning that she had confidently came up with……is incorrect? That's surely a possibility that she didn't want to entertain. And just as everyone were tilting their heads and looking at each other in puzzlement, Leticia suddenly broke the silence---

"…It's starting."

"Eh?"

"The Game has resumed! Take the opportunity while I'm still able to hold back the huge dragon to completely clear the winning condition! Otherwise I ……might cause [Underwood]……!"

"---

GYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEYAAA

EEEEEEEEEEYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

The sound of a dragon’s screech reverberated throughout the Ancient Citadel and lightning forked the skies overcast with thunderclouds, lighting up the room’s interior.

The huge dragon that had almost destroyed [Underwood] a few days ago had made its reappearance.

Kirino who had been waiting in the cloisters was out of breath as she ran into the room with terror written all over her face.

“Every…Everyone! The screech just now…could it be…..”

“The …the game has really resumed?”

“But why did it resume? Isn’t it still in the midst of ceasefire? Could it be that the Host has overstepped her……”

Yō froze up at those words and the others had also held their breaths as they seemed to have reached the same conclusion.

“……Could it be……that because of my actions of trying to clear the game……that the ceasefire has been forcefully terminated…..? All because of my mistake in reasoning that the dragon has……”

“No! Yō’s not wrong! It’s precisely because it was the correct answer that the game has resumed!”

"Eh?" Yō looked at Leticia with a frantic expression. Leticia was similarly shaken but her eyes were still calm as she spoke in a steady voice to try to influence Yō to be calm and rational:

"Yō, look at me. Your conjecture is surely in the right direction and that's why the Game has resumed…… Do you get it? It's because the Game is almost cleared that the ceasefire has come to an end."

"Uu…? Eh? But what does that mean?"

"In other words, you still lack something that would lead you to clear the game completely."

Leticia had calmly informed Yō that she was just a step away from clearing the game and Yō had also realised that this wasn't the time for her to feel depressed as she slapped her cheeks to refocus her thoughts.

"……Garol-san, may I have another look at the Geass Roll? I might have missed out something just now."

"Okay, here."

Answering in a short and crisp manner, Garol immediately took out the goatskin parchment.

<<GIFT GAME NAME: "SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING">>

Winning conditions of the Participant:

***Gather the broken fragments of the constellations, and bring the Circle of Animals to present to the throne.**

***Following the proper procedure and using the Circle of Animals that have been restored to the throne as a guide, strike the heart of the revolutionist who is bounded in chains.**

"Do you get it?"

"……"

No I don't. Yō silently answered in her heart but she did not dare to say those words.

The howl of the dragon outside the Citadel intermingled with the peal of thunder and the combined noise shook the entire Ancient Citadel. Although it's said to be restrained by Leticia, the dragon would still descend to the lands below soon enough. And it was crucial to find the answer quickly, even if it were just a minute or second earlier. Garol's sturdy arms gripped Yō's shoulders to encourage her.

"Don't worry, calm down and you will eventually solve the riddle. Ojou-chan has the talent to understand the workings of this Game. I can swear that it's true. So don't give up now!"

"Uu……"

Yō was clenching her teeth so hard that a layer of enamel would have been almost worn off by the force. For if this were to continue, she would be causing harm to her friends on the ground.

And that fear, pressure and responsibility were weighing upon her.

By the time that she regained her control, Yō noticed that her hands were sweaty and starting to tremble.

---I don't get it……!

Where did I go wrong? The reasoning of 'The Circle of Animals', 'the broken fragments of the constellations' and regarding the 'present to the throne'.

"Could it be that up till there everything was right? Or was it a small part that was wrong? But if a small portion is wrong, it would mean that all the connected thoughts would crumble and in other words, if everything was right there's still something more and what could that something be? If I can't find it quickly, everyone would be in danger and……!"

"Calm down, Kasukabe Yō! You being like this…… Can you still be called Kasukabe Koumei's daughter?!"

"--- ……eh?"

In that moment.

Yō's brain momentarily blanked out.

The interpretation of the Game, the current situation, the dragon and everything had been tossed to the back of her mind and her brain was completely a blank sheet of white.

"……Garol-san?"

"Yes, I did know your father quite well and I'm not the only one here who knows him well….. am I right, Leticia?"

Garol turned his head to regard Leticia keenly.

On the contrary, her expression was that of having received a blow from the news.

"Kou…Koumei….? You mean that Kasukabe [Shaomei]…that Koumei?"

"……Is that so? Leticia only knows of the name that he used while he was a sculptor?"

Garol looked a little sad as he stared at Yō's eyes as he supported her by the shoulders while chiding:

"Yō Ojou-chan. Your father was an amazing person. I've already lost count on the number of times that he has saved me. And it's not only me for the person who rescued [Underwood] from the Demon Lord ten years ago is none other than your father."

"…..Uso. You must be lying……"

"I'm not lying! Okay if you have any doubts about my words, you can come to my house to see the portrait of him that hangs in my hall! Your father is a wandering sculptor who likes to wear tattered clothes, laconic and clumsy. When meeting an

awkward situation, he would talk in a whisper and is a person who has a perfect and envious stature and appearance of a really handsome man……!”

Garol described his friend fondly with mixed feelings.

“And most importantly…… he’s a man who uses his power for his comrades!”

---“Yō must also treasure her friends”. Her father’s words flashed in her mind.

“As his daughter, Ojou-chan should not be unable to clear this sort of low standard Game! You will be able to clear this game and save everyone! Kasukabe, find your confidence and bring it out!”

Garol shook Yō’s shoulders while shouting for her to get a grip of herself. And as his words got through to Yō, she took a deep breath.

---That was the first. The first time that someone had ever described her father in such a fond way for no one in her former world had ever done so before. And hence she had many questions that sprung to mind for Garol.

About her father, she wanted to ask for more details on him, wanted to talk and be proud of him.

But if she wanted to boast of her father----if she wanted to help her comrades, this wasn’t the time for that sort of conversation.

Lifting her head to look at the skies, she looked to the Geass Roll once more.

<<GIFT GAME NAME: "SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING">>

Winning conditions of the Participant:

3.*Gather the broken fragments of the constellations, and bring the Circle of Animals to present to the throne.

Following the proper procedure and using the Circle of Animals that have been restored to the throne as a guide, strike the heart of the revolutionist who is bounded in chains.

"……how is it?"

Yō who was keenly focused in her thoughts did not hear Garol's question.

For she was slowly chewing and digesting each and every word in her mind by repeating them a hundred, no , a thousand fold.

The scrambling of the word sequences, changing the perspective to look at the matter and to link up all the words to form a proper---

"---Following the proper procedure …… the Circle of Animals?"

"……yes?"

"Proper, Circle of Animals……yes that's right. It refers to the 'correct sequence of the zodiacs'!"

Yō stood up abruptly.

"And since there's a 'correct sequence of the zodiacs'……that also means that 'there's a mistake in the original'…… and linking it with the other three clearing conditions…… 'Zodiac' or should I say the 'Twelve zodiacs'…… No, maybe it's the celestial divisions itself that has been mistaken!"

Yō retrieved the [Fragments of the Celestial Globe] from the wall to inspect the edges to see if they fit nicely as she placed the fragments of Aeries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio together---

"Yō Ojou-chan. How…How is it? "

"…… It's as I thought. The fragments of Scorpio and Sagittarius cannot be fitted together. The number of constellations along the elliptical path of the Sun isn't twelve but thirteen……"

The Twelve celestial divisions of the Zodiac had existed since the ancient times. And since this Ancient Citadel served a role of being an observatory satellite, the Vampires should have been able to obtain a more in-depth knowledge of astrology.

Leticia looked up sharply upon hearing those words.

Could that be…… The thing referred to as the [The Thirteen Sun]?

Yō quickly picked up the remaining fragments that were brought by Kirino to piece them together but none of them were fragments that would close the gap between the two constellations. It was a fragment that hasn't been found.

Yō stood up and quickly gave orders to the rest.

"Everyone, get moving and search for the constellation between Scorpio and Sagittarius! If the Outer wall is really constructed with the Celestial globe in mind,

then it should lie somewhere in the middle of those two sectors. The last constellation will surely lie there---!”

“---No it ends here, little girl!” the voice interrupted Yō’s words.

The windows darkened with the shadow of the enemy before they were violently shattered by the enemy’s entrance.

Jack who stood guard in the corner immediately assumed a fighting posture by bringing out his lanterns that blazed with the Purgatory flames.

“It’s my miscalculation……Kasukabe Ojou-chan! Please get away from here!”

To have allowed the enemy to get this close without sensing the presence, Jack lamented over his inattentiveness summoning the Purgatory Flames from three of his lanterns. Although this was the last reserves of his power, but Jack had immediately recognised that the enemy was a formidable one and had decided to throw all the Purgatory Flames towards the enemy.

“That’s barely warm enough! You inferior demon!”

With just a slight waver in the silhouette of the enemy in the flames that crashed towards him in a wave, all the flames were snuffed out accompanied by a ferocious roar of rage.

“Wha…What?!” Jack spluttered in surprise.

But the thick strong talons of the enemy got hold of the pumpkin head and shook it before flinging towards the stairs leading to the cloisters.

“Ja… Jack-san!”

“Kirino! Don’t! Just run now!”

Yō was now feeling the pricks of cold sweat as she shouted to Kirino.

Kirino who felt her legs go jelly sat down before the doorway and being the closest to see the enemy's full appearance, she gasped in a trembling voice:

"Black…Black Gryphon?"

Kirino's face had paled and sweat had formed on the surface of her forehead. And hovering above her was the Gryphon that was completely black from the feathers of the Eagle's head to the fur of the Lion's body.

But the most impressionable part of him would still be the [Genome Tree] that was carved before his chest and the huge dragon's horn sprouting from the middle of his forehead.

Garol had also paled though he stared angrily at the enemy.

"Gra…Graiya…. You are still alive?!"

"Well, well, it's been some time since we last met isn't it, Garol-dono. Ever since my departure after the ascension ceremony, we haven't had the chance to meet right?..... but I don't have the time to converse leisurely today!"

Graiya spoke loudly to intimidate his audience while flapping his black wings to generate strong wind currents. Garol who had been caught up by one of the gusts had been slammed into the wall behind him and had slid down haplessly.

"Wuoh!"

"Let's say that I will spare you for the last looking on the account of our old times' sake. But currently, I've an important person to take care of first."

The Black Gryphon spared another glance towards Garol before darting his eyes back to Kasukabe jubilantly.

“It sure is a fortunate and happy occasion, Koumei’s daughter. To actually be able to solve the answer of the Game’s riddle to this extent, it sure is expected of you…… I can’t thank the fate of the stars enough for this!”

“……wha…What?”

“My name is Graiya Greif! And you who holds the bloodline of the one who managed to defeat my older brother Draco Greif! Let’s put the pride of our bloodlines to the bet and have another rematch---!”

The black Gryphon gave a majestic roar before charging towards Yō. Yō who narrowly dodged the attack called to the others:

“Go and search for the thirteenth constellation! This person is only targeting me!”

“Bu…But, Yō Ojou-chan!”

“Go now!”

Yō shouted her last request to them before whipping up a whirlwind to take the fight outside as she noticed that it would be bad to have it in that confined space with the other’s around her. And Graiya had also pursued after her relentlessly.

The whirlwinds of the Gryphon coupled with the flames of the Dragon Horn. The power of the two had swirled into a vortex that summoned a storm of flames and winds that tossed Yō into the air.

Yō who managed to regain her footing immediately recognised the difference in power levels.

Really….Really strong!

She feared that this might just be the strongest of the opponents whom she had faced till date.

In that sort of foreboding and fear, Kasukabe Yō had drawn the curtains for the last battle.

And [SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING] had entered its final stages.

Chapter 2

Part 1

---South-Eastern Plains of [Underwood].

The battle on the Plains was now thrown into confusion as Asuka, Sala and the [Draco Greif] Alliance were deep in the enemy's lines and were surrounded by the resurrected Titans.

Titans who were released from the curse of Percher's Black Death disease.

Recognizing the fall in morale of her comrades from the Alliance, Sala shouted words of encouragement to them:

"Stand Strong! Even if our enemies may have broken free from their curse of Black Death, they have not fully recovered their strength! So long as we rid ourselves of this witch, it will still be our win! NO MATTER WHAT COMES, KEEP YOUR FORMATION TO THE END!"

Those words were none the wiser for inspiring them, who have been surrounded. Being that far into the enemy’s territory they would not have stood a chance of breaking out of this situation if they were to be overwhelmed by fear. And the best solution to their current predicament would be to defeat Aura who manipulated the Titans.

“Guys, I will deal with her! Tackle the Titans and do not allow them to overrun the ground we have left! Let’s charge!”

With the spirited battle cries and howls of the Alliance members, they charged and launched their attack on the Titans.

Sala who stood before Aura gave a sidelong meaningful glance at Asuka and Percher.

“Please lend me your strengths to defeat her.”

“Don’t you think that now’s a little late to say that? I’ve already planned on doing that from the get-go.”

“Though you may say that, without any possibility of us winning, all that you said would just be pure garbage. How can you expect me to help with defeating someone whose power exceeds mine?”

Percher asked sarcastically and her tone seemed to carry a bubbling anger.

However, before Asuka could come up with a retort, Jin broke into her thoughts to speak up:

Percher, are you able to touch [The Death Eye of Balor] for a moment?

……what did you say?

As a battle strategy, that sort of question was a little too unusual but Percher decided to give it a customary confirmation.

Aura stood at the heart of the ritual grounds holding [The Death Eye of Balor] while a murky black light surrounded her. Judging the vortex that seemed different from the Black Death winds in appearance, Percher gave a shake of her head in disgust.

……No, that’s not possible. That would just be similar to reaching a hand into a poisonous swamp.

Even Percher wouldn’t be able to do it?

I've already said that it's impossible. Although I'd used the description of a poisonous swamp, that thing is basically a Gift that is fundamentally equivalent to the Death Winds released by me when I was a God-class spirit. Anyone who touches it would immediately be dead.

……is that so?

Moreover, just being able to touch it wouldn't be of any use right? Jin, what did you plan for me to do?

Percher asked in surprise. Jin was quiet for half a beat before softly muttering, seeming to be in deep thought about something.

---but perhaps it might be the same thing.

Hah?

Both you and [The Death Eye of Balor] may be fundamentally the same.

That point of view came to her as a surprise and Percher couldn't help but widen her eyes and doubt her hearing.

……Not of the same family branch but of the same type and element?

Nn. Demon Lord Balor was fundamentally a Humanoid. But it's just that his race was of the Titan. In addition, it's been said in the Celtic mythologies that his 'Death Eye' is something created after some time and not from birth. From there, we can speculate that he had attained his Godhood along his life somewhere and had also simultaneously become the subject that commanded fear and respect. In other words, it was during the time which the Black Death enslavement method was constructed that he became the symbol of awe and death. And I believe that the death

eye aka [The Death Eye of Balor] appeared when these were accumulated to a certain level. It is a high possibility that it is a similar type of God-class spirit as a God-class Percher---Black Percher.

Hearing Jin's conjecture, Percher was deeply taken aback and she furrowed her brows while nodding.

…I see. So, what do you want me to do to [The Death Eye of Balor]?

You have the highest compatibility with the power of [The Death Eye of Balor] in the field, and that makes you able to snatch the Death Eye from the enemy's grasp while it is still in the process of the spell casting.

…you really do come up with some unreasonable demands.

Nn……that's why I will not force you to do it…If you agree to the plan, please share the information to Asuka-san. I think she would lend you a hand.

Is that so? I will think about it when I'm in a good mood.

At that point, Percher cut off the telepathic conversation. Widening her eyes, she cast a look at Asuka.

Surprised by the sudden stare from Percher in her direction, Asuka tilted her head and questioned:

"What's the matter? Arrived at a plan?"

"Yes. But it will be a small gamble with only one chance ……Care to join me?" Percher replied with a relaxed smile while Asuka nodded her head enthusiastically.

"There's no more time to waste with keeping secrets and withholding information! If you have a plan, just spit it out already!"

"……well, it's not that complicated. You and Deen will be in charge of opening the path right up to the spot where [The Death Eye of Balor] is. And I will run along the path to snatch the Death Eye from the enemy's hands. How's that? Simple right?" Percher said with a smile.

Asuka's face had already darkened halfway through Percher's words as she looked towards the murky black light that swirled around the ritual ground.

"……You mean for Deen to rush headlong into that swirling murky mass?"

"Yeah, that's right. That thing could be said to be fundamentally similar in element to my Death Winds. It will have no effect whatsoever on your Iron Doll…… It's just that Aura will not ignore the threat. So, what's your decision?"

"……Okay. There's already no time to waver on decisions."

Turning her head back, Asuka could see Titans who had been released from the curse of Black Death pouring into the city of [Underwood] and had already started wrecking the structures. There was no more time to spare on indecisiveness.

Percher looked at Asuka in a coolly unconcerned manner before giving a quiet smile.

"Well, since little red girl has agreed, then I will also play my part for the gamble. Ah, right. Salamander can stand back for now."

"Bu…But---"

"Sala, don't worry about us, just direct the battle with the Titans."

With that, Asuka began to take action by getting off from Deen's shoulder to stand on the ground while reaching out to hold his hand, saying softly:

"……Sorry Deen. I'm always giving you the most tedious of missions. But this is something that only you can do."

"DeN."

Deen gave a small movement of his one-eye head while giving a short response. After all, no matter how unreasonable Asuka's demands were, this Red Iron Doll would always carry out the orders without question.

And although they couldn't communicate with words, Asuka felt that he was more dependable than anyone else.

Percher took a step back as she made way for Deen which turned to face the route to Aura directly---

"Just a moment will do. Clear and open the way for me to reach [The Death Eye of Balor]."

"I got it--- Deen! Break through!"

"DEEEEEEEEeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEN!"

Deen gave a loud roar before launching a sudden attack flying towards the murky swamp-like veil of black light.

Aura who stood in the midst of that had let out a shrill laugh that seemed to mock Asuka and Percher's attempt which she believed to be just a valiant but feeble and stupid action.

"I had thought that you guys would try something better than just trying to break through with brute force! It seems like you have been broken one too many times and can't get your act together, [Black Death Demon Lord]!"

"Who knows? Let the results do the talking shall we?"

Percher responded to Aura's mocking smile with a relaxed smile of her own.

Her words hit home and Aura lost her composure soon enough.

Deen who had launched himself into his combat mode continued to press forth in the swirling black light of the veil with his Iron body. Just like the battle with Percher previously, it is proven once again that Gifts of Death do not have an effect on the Rare Sacred Iron that it was constructed with.

And Aura was prepared for this scenario.

"Hoho, using the same sort of attack and expecting it to work?.....Don't look down on me!"

Aura took out her [Golden Harp] to call down lightning from the Thunder clouds above. Although it would seem that her control of the lightning's target couldn't be called precise, some of them still managed to land a hit on Deen. But even as the lightning spears called down from the sky struck Deen, he continued to move forth while roaring furiously.

"DEEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeEEEEEEEEEEEN!"

The lightning that was called down by the control of weather coursed through the Red Giant body. Amidst the explosions, dust and smoke erupted from the surroundings around Deen.

Noticing that the Iron doll was still moving forward while tearing through the veils with his arms, Aura gave a click of her tongue in irritation.

"Tch, irritating……! Well, I will just have to aim for the one controlling it!"

Aura concentrated a part of the swirling black light emitted from [The Death Eye of Balor] into her palm. And realizing that something bad was about to happen, Percher frantically shouted out:

“Not Good……Asuka, Hide! QUICKLY---!”

“Uu!”

Percher had shouted loudly but it was already too late.

The concentrated black light that was in Aura’s palm was thrown towards Asuka’s chest. Asuka who had sensed the danger had frantically raised her right hand and the ray……

Part 2

"……Eh?"

Kuro Usagi who had rushed over to save Asuka was so shocked by the sight that she stopped short in her tracks. Similarly, Sala who rushed over, Percher, and even the enemy Aura herself, had their attention stolen by the flames released by Asuka's right hand.

"What…What is this?"

Even Asuka herself was at a loss for words at the sight before her.

---That's right. This is not a figure of speech.

The flames released from Asuka's right gauntlet had BURNT AWAY THE BLACK RAY---

"How….How is that possible?! A Human…Human who's able to negate the skill of a God class Gift?"

The reason for Aura being so disheartened could only be due to the absurdity of the situation before her eyes.

Asuka had only said a command of "BURN!" at the instant before the Death Ray's impact and just with that, she had blocked the ray that should have sealed her fate. It wasn't that Aura didn't know about the workings of the world but it was the contrary that caused her to understand the extent of how this sight before her broke the normal laws of the world. Even Kuro Usagi who was more familiar with Asuka's Gift took a while to comprehend the situation before her.

The [Authority] of Asuka-san…… Could it also include [The ray of Medusa] and [Ray of Balor] in its entire control of Gifts?!

Kuro Usagi reflected on the encounters that Asuka had to display her power.

One, using Spirit power to subdue those who were inferior to herself.

Two, immensely adding to another's spiritual level.

Three, using her power to heighten the spiritual power of a Gift to the next level.

A Gift that couldn't be placed into a specific classification due to its wide range of abilities. Hence, Kuro Usagi could only speculate that the Gift's true power was one that was more fundamental with a diverse range of powers behind it.

The Ray of Medusa is a Gift that is able to petrify the spirit of the target.

While the Ray of Balor is a Gift that is able to kill off the spirit of the target.

Could it be that the Ray that Asuka just released is also one of those kinds that can affect the target's spirit?

The Gift that was crafted by Sala-sama isn't that strong by itself. With a firepower in the gauntlet that shouldn't have been able to melt even a lump of metal. But when such simple Gifts were to be placed into the hands of Asuka-san to wield, even those that were supposed to produce a small spurt of fire would transform into a miracle that could compete evenly with the level of Gods with just a command of "BURN!"!

That's right---the optimization of Gifts to its greatest level. If this guess were to be true, Asuka would be able to obtain the power to fight evenly with the Gods with just simple Gifts.

Percher who similarly witnessed the sight felt a sudden interest in Asuka's abnormal powers taking root in herself.

That's indeed interesting! A community that has gathered so many abnormally talented individuals still mucking around in the lower levels……

The current Asuka was still not in perfect control of her talents.

But judging by the standards of a raw and unpolished gem, this could be said to be a very impressive talent that would rank high on the charts. And that was Percher's judgement on Asuka's Gift.

Following the sudden surge of fighting spirit in her heart, Percher ran along the path opened by Deen and reached out her hand towards [The Death Eye of Balor].

With a vicious mocking smile at Aura, she declared:

"It ends here, Aura. It's now your turn to taste a shot of [The Death Eye of Balor]'s Ray!"

"You…You bitches! DAMN YOU!"

Aura gave a desperate howl in rage as she continued to hold onto the [The Death Eye of Balor] tightly.

But it was just a futile act on her part. A mere sorcerer against an amalgamation of millions of spirits resurrected after being killed by Black Death, even if experience and talent was on her side, it didn't take much to understand who the victor would be.

Aura who was desperately resisting seemed to have realized the inevitable as she closed her eyes for a moment.

……Please forgive me, Your Highness. It looks like there's no other way but that.

Aura drew an object from her robes that looked similar to the tip of a spear.

However, that spear that measured to only the length of a dagger was emitting a dazzling bright light. And it was only when Aura lifted the spear tip that Percher, who was exerting her full strength in wresting it, caught on to her actions.

"Aura! Isn't that spear tip……"

"Yes. That's right. This is the spear tip that has pierced through [The Death Eye of Balor] in the Ancient times. [Holy Spear Brionac]. Although it is incomplete, but with such a small distance……"

Steeling her resolve, Aura plunged the spear tip into the Death eye, causing it to petrify and crack into two halves.

A half that fell into Percher's hands while the other falling into her own.

The dark glow that surrounded them gave off a sharp whistling sound as it began to increase in turbidity and lash out at allies and enemies alike without discrimination. At the moment when a dark glow was about to strike at Aura who was blown back by the blast, she was saved by Rin's timely arrival on the scene.

"Aura-san! Are you alright?!"

"……Nn. Rin, thank you."

Propping up Aura with herself as support, Rin immediately spirited themselves away from the Ritual grounds in a blink of an eye. In the fields where the Death rays raged wildly out of control, no one noticed their departure.

Holding half of [The Death Eye of Balor], Percher looked around at the battlefield where screams and moans of agony started to fill the air.

“This sure looks like a hassle…”

The Death rays that were similar to the Black winds of death were swirling and destroying everything that were unfortunate enough to stand in its path. It was most probably due to Percher who had the highest compatibility to its element having come into contact with it before it was destroyed, leading to a portion of the Death Eye’s power being unleashed.

And since [The Death Eye of Balor] was destroyed, they could only wait for it to settle down with the passing of time.

“---Percher! Behind you! Dodge it quickly!”

“Eh?” Percher turned to look behind her to see a condensed cloud of Death ray closing in on her rapidly.

And to protect Percher, Kuro Usagi stood between the Death ray and Percher.

“SUN ARMOR GUH….”

Though Kuro Usagi had raised her [Mahabharata Papers] to equip her indestructible armor, the impact of the ray still managed to send her flying back to fall hard on the ground meters away from Percher.

Percher who was surprised by the turn of events felt her mind freeze up for a moment before recovering enough of her wits to rush to Kuro Usagi’s side.

“Kuro…Kuro Usagi! You…!”

“……Uu……” Kuro Usagi who had lost consciousness lay limply on the ground.

Percher who had paled from worry, immediately started to check on Kuro Usagi. Upon realizing that Kuro Usagi had merely lost consciousness without any other serious injuries, Percher gave a sigh of relief.

Asuka who had rushed over with a face filled with worry asked with her emotions leaking into her voice:

“Is Kuro Usagi okay?”

“Nn. Just that she passed out from the impact.”

Hearing that, Asuka also felt relieved.

And perhaps it’s a passing effect of the Sun Armor on the miasma of [The Death Eye of Balor] that swirled around the battlefield for it started to dissipate and calm down after that collision with Kuro Usagi.

Meeting each other’s gaze, they both sank onto the ground in a sitting position as the adrenaline drained out of them and weariness slowly crept in.

“What a relief…… I wouldn’t have known what to tell Izayoi-san and Kasukabe-san if something were to happen to Kuro Usagi.”

Asuka gave a sigh of relief in her heart. For Kuro Usagi was just that important an existence to the three of them.

Percher shuddered at the thought of the scene if Kuro Usagi were to die due to her fault and couldn’t help but grimace.

“But……With this, everything ends right?”

“The Game itself hasn’t ended yet and there’s still the task of chasing out the remaining groups of the Titans.

“Nn, that sort of thing is a small thing that it doesn’t even need to be mentioned. As long as they do not have [The Death Eye of Balor]……”

Percher wanted to say ‘there’s nothing to fear’ but her words were interrupted and her facial expressions cramped up.

“……Asuka, was the date for the game continuation set for today?”

“Eh?.... Eh?”

Asuka lifted her head to look at the skies and she too froze up.

For up in the thundercloud filled skies, a head on an immensely long neck had broken through to look down upon them with its full body still hidden from view.

Opening its huge jaws that could easily swallow up a Mountain and River whole, it gave off an earth shaking roar while charging down to land.

Part 3

---Ancient Vampire Citadel, Outer Walls.

Izayoi and Gry had met up with Ayesha and the others having been led by Jack's shikigami. And hearing about Yō's conjecture from Ayesha, Izayoi's face had darkened and he immediately gave instructions to search for the thirteenth piece of the Constellation fragment.

"Damn, it's my fault for being a step behind. I should have at least told Yō about the warning that Leticia gave before being taken away. For if I did, things might not have progressed to this stage!"

"That…That's not really your fault isn't it? Rather than mope about it, let's search for the last fragment."

While consoling him, Ayesha continued to search through the rubble. Izayoi was rarely this unsettled to the extent of needing Ayesha to console him but this was also forgivable for the Game had restarted and the huge dragon was waiting in the thunderclouds above.

Who knew when the dragon would start its descent to [Underwood] below.

It may be quiet for now but if it goes on a rampage, the damages it would wreck would surely be devastating……perhaps……

Izayoi subconsciously gripped his left arm.

To prepare for the worst, he had to mentally prepare himself.

Even if that strike---would kill his comrade.

Part 4

Yō put her all into defending herself and dodging. Initially flying around the Palace, Yō had soon realized that her expertise in flight was much inferior to her enemy. Compared to a true Gryphon and one that had a dragon horn too, there was no escape in the skies.

And so, changing her battle strategy, she landed in the structures outside the Outer walls, planning to seek shelter in the ruins to gain what precious time there is for the others.

Entering an alley-way battle, Yō who had her sensitive 5 senses pushed them to the maximum to pinpoint her enemy. Controlling her steps to tread lightly, she passed through many structures in the ruins while hiding her tracks.

I shouldn't be that easily found in the city ruins of the Outer Walls……

There were many obstacles and few hiding places. But during the time of which Garol and the others were searching for the last fragment, she had taken it upon herself to delay her enemy as much as possible.

Graiya looked down at the city that stretched beyond the Outer wall as he started to mock Yō who had gone into hiding:

"Hah, trying to buy time? Do you think you can hide completely just like that?"

Graiya roared loudly as his Black Gryphon appearance instantly underwent a rapid transformation. The Phylogenetic Tree carved on the [Genome Tree] before his chest was revolving continuously and causing his DNA structure to undergo a major change similar to being reborn.

The sound of bones snapping under pressure and contorting echoed in the skies above and Yō couldn't help but draw a sharp intake of breath as she observed the transformation from the shadows.

What…What in the world is that……!

Graiya no longer had those jet black wings and beak but had two more heads growing from his neck and giant jaws to match. The final transformation was that of a Giant Hound. Graiya who had undergone a complete transformation, that left no trace of his former look, was now a Cerberus looking creature that had landed on the ground of the Outer city.

And with a sniff with those three noses, Graiya stared pointedly at the old building that Yō was hiding in---

"….so there you are!"

Gaping the huge jaws, the dragon horn glittered as it whipped up a blazing hot sandstorm that travelled towards Yō.

Yō stumbled as she ran out of the old building and escaped into the skies with her flight.

"Foolish girl! Did you forget that we Gryphons do not need to have Wings to fly?"

"Uu……!"

Graiya's strong limbs stepped onto the air with much force and immediately closed the distance to take a bite at Yō. The sharp fangs barely missed its mark and Yō managed to dodge it successfully.

However, the enemy was a three headed hound. The huge jaws of the hound once again closed in on Yō with a fast follow up attack, seeming intent on crunching her bones. And just one brush against those fangs that were snapping at her in a tri-continuous manner was enough to make a gash on Yō's leg, causing bright red droplets of blood to spurt from the wound.

Reaching the conclusion that she would be a goner if she didn't put some distance between them, Yō gave a kick at the nose of the Hound and using the momentum to make a rapid descent. Yet, the maneuver wasn't perfectly executed and Yō partially descended due to the butting of the Hound's nose on her leg, causing her to grimace in pain as she landed awkwardly.

"Itai……!"

But it wasn't time for her to be focused on the pain yet. Yō immediately got up, planning to escape into the ruins, but found her way barred by a Graiya who had resumed his Gryphon appearance once more.

As Yō prepared herself for battle, Graiya looked at Yō in surprise.

"……?"

"……I don't get it. Why are you not using your [Genome Tree] to transform? Even if the result wouldn't have changed a bit, you might at least be able to defend a little longer."

"……Transform?" Yō panted as she replied with a question.

Seeming to have realized something unimaginable about his opponent, Graiya squinted his eyes.

“Ojou-chan, could it be that you do not know anything about your Gift?”

“Eh?”

“The [Genome Tree] is a Gift that can create a Genome Weapon . The possessor will definitely transform into a mutant beast by sampling data on the other races through physical contact……Could it be that you are using it without knowing what it is?”

Yō held her breath as she clutched her pendant that her father had given to her.

“Physical contact……Sampling…..?”

“That’s right. The strong attack that you threw at me earlier originated from the strength of the Titans. You should still be able to recall right? The battle with the Titans when they attacked [Underwood] a few days ago, you must have come into contact with them.”

Hearing that, Yō felt as though her heart had stopped for a while.

Needless to say, Yō definitely remembered the time that she was knocked away by the Titan in battle but never did she think that with just that physical contact, she would have obtained a new Gift.

……No, before that, shouldn’t the Gift’s power originate from the proof of being close to that other race---?

“….Hng. How sad. Little girl, it would seem that you didn’t even know that your father had created a monster out of you.”

“Shut up---!”

Momentarily forgetting her pain and with her boiling rage in her, she took a step forward to launch a flying kick at Graiya's lower jaw. The kick off from the ground was strong enough to cause a depression in the ground.

But taking off into flight in the trajectory of the kick, Graiya flew into the skies while giving a warning out of pity---

"Even if you live on, you will continue to suffer from the awakening mutant beast that is in you. Well, there you go. A little chip off the mountain in knowledge about the Gift that your father has created. And that will also be the last present I have for you before you say Goodbye to this world!"

Flames emitted from Graiya's Dragon Horn started to cloak his body and the figure clad in flames started to contort and transform into a monster that possessed a huge body. The black Gryphon appearance was no more to be seen---Amidst the storm of flames, a black dragon with thick arms and legs stood in his place with a dragon horn growing from its head.

"Gryphon becoming a Dragon…….!"

"This is just part of the powers that your father had created with this Gift. And this is the true might of [Genome Tree]!"

Graiya who had transformed into a Wyvern opened his jaws to gather flames in his mouth which he fired in a sweeping motion at the entire Outer City, scorching the regions to crisp and black ashes while whipping up a wind through the rapid heating of air that started to buffet the area like the formation of a hurricane. A fiery hurricane.

With a devastating power that could destroy the entire Palace grounds, it formed a storm of fire and wind in the region.

Yō could only cloak herself in a veil of her own whirlwinds to save herself as she could find no opening in the attack for her to escape.

Damn……!

However, this defense was just like a paper in the winds. Yō who was enclosed by the Raging Fire storm whirlwinds could not even raise a hand to retaliate and was easily flung back together with chunks of debris from the ruins.

With heat that seemed to deplete all oxygen levels in the area, it was already a miracle for her to be able to keep her limbs attached.

And though she knew that it was necessary to escape as soon as she can, Yō found herself unable to command her body to do so.

My limbs……can't move……

A throbbing soreness from her badly battered body and the wound that seared as if it were ablaze, it all compounded to her pain as she suffered from her injuries that made her feel as though death was closing in on her. And she knew that she wasn't in the condition to search for a hiding place anymore.

Graiya soon landed before Yō, shaking his head while looking at her sorry state.

"If you didn't put up that much of a struggle, you would have died a little easier. Struggling all the way to the point of death is really very unsightly you know, Ojou-chan."

"Well it sounds about right when you put it that way."

Though it might sound like a joking reply, it actually was all that Yō could do. For her strength was draining quickly out of her due to her numbed limbs and the burns that covered her body that sapped at her with all its pain combined.

Her current self could be liken to a prey lying on the ground haplessly. Being looked down upon by others was just something that couldn't be helped anymore and as Yō thought of that, she began to laugh bitterly.

Graiya looked at her with pity as he closed in slowly while gathering another mouth of flames in his jaws. Just then---

A small shadow came between the two of them.

"Leave…Leave Yō-san alone!"

The flowery adornments shook before Yō's eyes as Kirino, who had tailed Yō's movements in the sky from the ground, stood between the two of them.

Graiya fixed his angry stare at Kirino:

“Move aside you little brat.”

“No, I won’t! Yō-sama is one of [Underwood]’s benefactors! If my…my benefactor is to be in trouble, how can I cower aside in fear! My…Our pride isn’t that low to do that sort of thing!”

“Kiri…Kirino...!”

Kirino’s eyes were filled with tears but the words that she shouted were filled with her determination.

Graiya’s enormous eyes glinted with a dangerous light as he gave a harrumph as he intimidated Kirino by standing taller.

“Our? Your [Underwood]’s going to be destroyed by tonight. As long as the huge dragon goes berserk, it wouldn’t even last a second. What pride are you counting on huh? Move aside now!”

His intimidation caused Kirino to shiver in fear but despite her young age, her heart was strong and supported with a reason that she would not back down on. Kirino fought against her senses as she stared back at the Black Dragon to shout out her resolve:

“If…If that is so, that’s more reason for me to stand in your way! Being a part of [Underwood], if my Community were to be annihilated, our lives will just continue to that very moment! So, until that very last moment, I will serve the morality and justice that I believe in to protect the benefactor of my Community!”

With a voice that quivered on the verge of crying, she shouted out words that were morally justifiable even if words seemed to give out on her. And it would seem that the conversation had come to an end.

Graiya squinted as he appraised Kirino---

"……Well, just hug that sense of pride and disappear together then---!"

"Ugh…Kirino……!"

Yō ran over after recovering from her numbness and shock to stand before Kirino. It was a desperate attempt but she didn't have any other plans. To save Kirino, she could only use her own body as the human shield and so she stood before Kirino.

Without any other place to run to and without any more time to escape.

Graiya gave an earth shaking roar while spewing a wave of heat towards them.

Part 5

---In Kasukabe Yō's mind, flashes of her past encounters started to replay in her mind like a revolving lantern.

From the mountains, seas, jungles, rivers, forest glades, lakes, cities, islands, land, world, the strange new worlds and all the meetings with others in Little Garden.

The first person who told her 'Please be my friend'.

The person who had silently sat by her bed while she was bedridden by the disease.

All the people who needed her.

"Abandon your family, friends, wealth and all that you have in your world and come forth to Little Garden".

To give me, the girl who had nothing to give up, a chance to change myself.

"……!"

No. I can't give up now! Even if it's just a small chance, I will definitely not let it go.

And so she stopped the replay of her past in her mind to focus.

---On the first day of the battle. Faceless had said it before that [Genome Tree] has two stages of [Evolving] and [Combining]. By referencing to her advice and utilising the Phylogenetic Tree's collected information that seemed almost boundless in it's limits, one might just form the DNA structure that can imitate that of a Eudemon.

---Eudemon races were existences that came about from the combination of two or more races.

The holder of an Eagle and Lion’s gene.

The holder of a Deer and Bird’s gene.

The holder of a Monkey, Snake and Tiger’s gene.

Precisely due to the evolution that should not have been possible in the original Phylogenetic tree, these creatures were then called as Eudemons.

Hence if one could freely control the DNA structures to change the very foundation of a life form---that person will undoubtedly be an amalgamation of all beasts and a scary mutant.

But, that’s not true! What dad gave to me…… can’t be that sort of thing!

A Gift to allow his daughter to be able to stand on her two legs to walk into the outside world.

A Gift that held this sort of feeling shouldn’t be that kind of dangerous item.

So she chose to believe. To believe in the time that she spent with her father, to believe in that present, to believe that she possessed the right to use various Gifts.

---Kuro Usagi had once said that the spirit was the accomplishment and hallmark of a person’s life.

Then Kasukabe Yō’s spirit would have amassed a wealth since the time she started to walk on her path of ‘Encounters’. The pendant that her father had given to her---held the meaning of a Gift of ‘Encounters’ to her.

To open the path in the world with one’s own legs; cradling the spirals in her hands, starting from the beginning of life to the end of the world, all the various DNAs of the millions of life forms. To count on the stars that shone the brightest in the

millions of encounters. A Single life form. A High-level life form. A Third generational Eudemon--- One that ruled over all the other races from ancient times till now, to utilise all the strands that exceeded Thirty-two thousand seven hundred and sixty-eight to form a single existence in the fastest time possible, becoming the greatest collector of all life itself---!

“WHAT?!”

Graiya couldn’t keep his consternation from his voice.

The heat wave had been blocked by the thing in her hands---a transformed [Genome Tree].

“That’s wrong! The [Genome Tree] you have described isn’t the [Genome Tree] that I know of!”

Yō gripped the pendant that had transformed into a staff in her hands.

Raising the staff that had a huge serpent head at its tip and coppery green wings, the fangs of the snake held the heat at bay before spitting out what seemed to be a dazzling ray of energy that crashed into a wing of the Black Dragon.

“GYAAA

Chapter 3

Part 1

---[Underwood], Foot of the Great Tree

At the appearance of the huge dragon, large quantities of Demonic Beasts started to appear on the ground.

Five-headed Hydras that had venom dripping from their fangs, fire salamanders that had heat radiating from their back ridges and many hundreds of different Demonic Beast species crawling out of the Earth and clawing their way to the surface to cover the entire Plains of [Underwood].

The only fortunate thing to rejoice about was the lack of unity or teamwork amongst them that made them just a disorganized bunch.

The [No Name]s and [Draco Greif] Alliance had retreated to the foot of [Underwood]'s Great Tree to set up their final line of defense there.

Riding on Deen's shoulder, Asuka and Deen continuously pounded Demonic Beasts to dust. And between them and Sala, Deen's strong arms would grapple the Demonic Beasts while Sala released flames she gathered in her palms to burn the Beasts to ash.

Back facing the City while using their bodies to block the charge of the Demonic Beasts. For no other strategies would have been effective. Since the huge dragon had appeared, it would mean that the battle would not end until the invading group cleared the Game.

Fighting shoulder to shoulder, Asuka and Sala worked seamlessly with their synchronized attacks but it was just a matter of time before their strength would give up on them.

Sala who had defeated twenty Demonic Beasts used the back of her hand to wipe off the sweat that beaded her forehead as she looked up at the skies.

In the next moment, the huge dragon started its rapid descent from the thunderclouds and was rushing towards the Plains.

“---The Dragon is descending! Everyone, grab onto something to anchor yourself now!”

Sala desperately shouted her warning while the alarms at the watch post had also started to toll frantically.

The huge Dragon swooped with its long and large body that would have easily exceeded the circumference of a mountain range while giving out a loud roar as it skimmed across the top of [Underwood].

「――

GYEEEEEEEEEYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaEEEEEEEEEEEEYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaa!」

The draft whipped up by its passing did not send only those of the [Draco Greif] Alliance air borne, but also caused many of the Demonic Beasts to be sent into the skies like insignificant garbage in its way.

But that wasn’t a reason to rejoice for the Game had clearly resumed.

And following the swoop of the huge dragon, all the other natural disasters such as violent wind, storm and lightning, earthquakes started to occur one after another, leading [Underwood] to ruin.

The endless flow of Demonic Beasts and the huge Dragon that shook the Heavens with just its passing.

Realizing that this was much worse than they could handle, Sala shouted at Asuka who stood by her in the battle with the huge scorpions.

"……Asuka! You guys should also leave [Underwood] together with the other Participants---"

"How can I escape at this time?"

Deen caught the tail of the scorpion and twisted it off while stomping on the rest of its body. Asuka gave a pointed glance at Sala---

"Izayoi-san and the others are still fighting. The reason for the huge Dragon starting to rampage again is definitely due to that. So how can you expect me to flee?! You aren't the only one whom I've promised to protect [Underwood]!"

Asuka shouted in a way that seemed to be a morale boost for herself as well as a defiant cry against the threat that swooped in the skies.

And Sala knew that there was no use in continuing to press Asuka to leave now.

"……Sorry about that, Asuka……!"

Sala had just lowered her gaze while apologizing when she noticed a group of Salamanders pouncing towards them at the same time.

Asuka immediately raised the gem embedded gauntlet on her left hand to release a jet of water from the seeds of the Water Tree. Following up with the attack, Deen stomped on all the Salamanders that were knocked back on the ground by the blast of water.

Then, a sound of something cracking came from Asuka's gemmed gauntlet.

"……what?! I've only used it thrice!"

Asuka stared at the gems on her gauntlets as she grinded her teeth in frustration. Even so, she chose not to retreat as she and Deen worked together to protect the last line of defense around [Underwood].

Only Kuro Usagi who was at the crown of the Great Tree, recovering from the blunt impact, observed and received information about the crack on the gem on the gauntlet. And she grimaced slightly while nodding in understanding.

The heightening of the Spiritual powers must have shaved off quite a bit of the Gift's durability. If it were made of Rare Sacred Iron with the techniques of the gods, the weapon wouldn't have this side effect but mere shavings of the Dragon Horn and seeds of the Water Tree wouldn't be able to stand the pressure of such a sudden injection of power.

Although that was surely a great talent, the weakness was just as clear as the talent. Gifts that might withstand Asuka's power might only be a piece of Dragon Horn or weapons of that class.

If only there's some weapon that can at least match up to the level of [Vajra Replica], Asuka-san's talent wouldn't be suppressed to this extent……

At this moment, Kuro Usagi felt disquieted but she who knew the battle situation more than anyone else still held onto a strand of hope.

Gazing up to the skies, she sent a quiet prayer for her comrades who continued to battle in the skies.

Izayoi-san……Yō –san…… If you can hear me, please clear the Game as fast as you can!

The situation had progressed to the stage where every minute and second counted to the saving of lives and just a moment's difference could lead to the downfall of [Underwood].

Bringing to bear the torment of being powerless, Kuro Usagi desperately prayed for her comrades' success.

Part 2

---Ancient Vampire Citadel, Elliptical Orbit Throne Room.

When Yō came to, she found herself lying on a familiar yet tattered back that saw recent signs of battle.

"……Izayoi?"

"Oh, you're awake. Looks like you went through quite a rough time eh."

The hearty laugh that was irritating yet calming seemed to echo in the cloisters.

"Remember to thank Kirino and Garol Oji-san later. If it weren't for them who bandaged you up, who knows what would have been left of you."

"……is that so?"

Yō slightly lifted her head to look ahead in the dark cloisters to make out the figures of Garol, Kirino and Jack taking the lead for Izayoi. It would also seem that everyone was safe.

Reaching that conclusion, Yō felt her strength give up on her as she lay on Izayoi's back with her mind at ease. Enjoying the broad back that felt more comfortable than she had thought ---Yō suddenly noticed something amiss about the feeling around her neck.

"…… Eh?"

……The Nekomimi headphones had disappeared.

Yō instantly paled as she turned to look around her abruptly.

"OiOi, don't move around too much when you are on another person's back."

"Eh? Ah, right…um sorry…"

Looks like Izayoi did not find out about the nekomimi headphones yet. Then where could it have dropped to…… or could it have been destroyed in the battle with Graiya?

Oh…Oh no….!

But with things the way it is now, finding it wouldn't be much of a plan. Yō was panicking in her heart but she could only lie on Izayoi's back for now.

Reaching the hall of the Throne Room, Izayoi bent to let Yō off his back to lean against the wall.

And held in his hand was the last constellation---Fragment of Ophiuchus.

Yō tilted her head while asking in surprise:

"Izayoi, you've already solved the riddle of the third and fourth clearing conditions?"

"Yep. I've heard the history of the Vampire from Leticia."

"……History of the Vampire? Before they came to Little Garden?"

"Nn. That dragon seems to be the [Dragon that carries the world of the Vampires]. To call it big, it sure is quite big…… but it's still not big to the level of carrying a planet. So I guess that the cosmology learnt by the Vampires is something of an analogy or metaphor based off some religion."

That's right---Izayoi's conjecture was "To not disrupt the Phylogenetic tree, they conducted their observation from the huge dragon's back.

“As long as the context is known, linking up the sky Citadel to a satellite would have been easy. And precisely because of that, I’ve already placed my focus on the Game’s title <SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT>. And last but not least comes the fourth clearing condition: ‘Following the proper procedure and using the Circle of Animals that have been restored to the throne as a guide, strike the heart of the revolutionist who is bounded in chains.’.”

“That condition also has a misleading outlook to it?”

“Of course. ‘Following the proper procedure to return the Circle of Animals to the throne’ isn’t that a repeat of the third condition only? The problem lies with the ‘strike the heart of the revolutionist who is bounded in chains’ that is the misleading factor that needs to be decoded……oh right Kasukabe, have you decoded it yet?”

“No, not yet.”

Yō gave an honest answer with the shake of her head while Izayoi, who was feeling his way around the stone wall of the throne room for the last slot to place the Fragment, cracked a smile in pride.

“Well, it’s only a simple play with words. The word ‘革命’ can be taken as [Revolutionary], right? This phrase also has the meaning of making a [Revolution] too. In other words, the Game’s structure is not based on the Mastermind of the [Revolution] but the person behind the [Revolution] and to [Right the wrong] that has to be linked up to find the important significance behind it all.”

As realization dawned upon Yō, she gave a thumbs up while nodding her head in awe.

"So if we conclude from all that, it would be safe to say that the fourth winning condition of 'strike the heart of the revolutionist' would be to strike the heart of the ---Huge Dragon?"

"Although it does sound a little weird, but that should be the idea behind it….Just that there's still one more thing to confirm."

As he ended his words there, Izayoi stayed silent as he carefully aligned the last Fragment to the depression in the wall mechanism.

But Izayoi did not immediately slot it in but turned back to look at the Leticia who sat on the throne.

"……Leticia. That huge dragon outside……Could that be you?"

"Eh?" The eyes of everyone in the room suddenly turned to focus on Leticia.

Leticia bowed down her head to hide her face in the shadow as she gave a slightly self-depreciating smile.

"……yea. You are right."

"What…What's going on, Izayoi?"

"Didn't the title already say it? This is a game that is hosted by the Vampire King and the huge dragon that has manifested from the sun synchronous orbit in the Vampire King. And Leticia's name had appeared twice in the clearing conditions. Although it wasn't confirmed earlier, connecting the dots isn't that much of a difficult task.

Izayoi gave a displeased harrumph at that.

Leticia nodded her head as she looked at him with a troubled expression.

"……When summoning the strongest race into Little Garden, one would surely require the Authority of the stars and a certain level of competence. And it was by chance that I had met both of the requirements then. A body that's been born out of a Pure-blooded Dragon…… and there was also the hallmark of our accomplishments as [Knights of Little Garden] …....and hence the Authority of the Thirteenth Zodiac."

And hence the huge dragon was born to play out the scenes of killing off one's own former comrades who had turned traitor.

Using the might of the Dragon's size and power to bring judgement to the traitors.

Regardless of the passing of time or the movements of the stars, those corpses continued to be tortured by her.

"But today, it will all come to a close. As long as the winning condition is met, the huge dragon will soon disappear as well. Once I've been rendered powerless, the Game will be cleared."

"……Can I believe the words you have said?"

Izayoi stared at Leticia with a serious expression.

And his words stirred a sense of unease that gripped Yō's heart.

But there's no other plan. If the huge dragon is Leticia's main body, all the other winning conditions would mean killing her. As long as we cause her to lose her powers and meet the clearing condition, Leticia will……

Then, Yō realized the reason for her uneasiness.

……HOW did that meet the condition?

How were they going to cause the Strong Huge Dragon outside to become powerless?

How were they going to free a Leticia who was bounded in chains?

Yō did not arrive at any plan yet but Izayoi had already inserted the last Fragment into the depression---

Instantly, all Geass Rolls were updated with the Proclamation of victory.

<<GIFT GAME TITLED: <SUN SYNCHRONOUS ORBIT in VAMPIRE KING”>>

Winner: Participating Community [No Name]:

Loser: Host Community [ ]:

****Respecting the above results, the game will come to an end.**

***In addition, since the third winning condition was cleared, the Veil will be released in twelve minutes.**

***And please understand that all time before that will still granted as time allotted for you to be injured.**

***Due to the immediate danger posed to the nocturnal races, please be reminded to retreat to Outer Gates outside of Outer Gate number 7759175.**

***Dear Participants, thank you for your hard work.**

Part 3

---Outer Gate number 775175, Fir Bolg Hill

His Highness looked out from the viewing platform of the Outer Gate to observe the situation of [Underwood] while striking up a conversation with Rin and the others who were awaiting further instructions.

"……Rin. The winning condition seems to be met."

"Nn. But when they had found the Fragments of the Celestial globe, I had already guessed that it would be a matter of time before they solved the riddle."

Giving a sigh, His highness sat on a chair from the Observatory.

"…This sure is the worst case possible. Graiya Oji-chan being injured and the Death Eye split into half and to lose such a nice Demon Lord Chess piece in the process.

"Nn. You're right. Especially with that dragon that has been stripped of its Authority and talents by a certain someone and causing it to enter a state of frenzy. If it weren't for the fact that it attacked without discrimination, it would have been the best pawn. What a pity~"

Rin chimed in.

His Highness shook his head at the pity of such a waste of talent but he soon recomposed his feelings to stand up while gazing towards the huge Dragon and the Ancient Citadel.

"……But anyways, since Shiroyasha is said to arrive, I would still have to beat a retreat. We can only say that we haven't prepared enough for this mission."

"Nn. If only Percher won last month, there wouldn't be such a problem now."

Rin pouted her lips unhappily.

His Highness only squinted his eyes as he looked at Rin with his golden irises.

“Rin, there’s still another reason for this.”

“Eh?”

“The most important factor is……It’s the same Community who defeated the two Demon Lords.”

The [No Name]s that had restricted range of activities had defeated Demon Lords twice in a row.

Even if the existence of the [Highborn of Little Garden] were to be factored in, this would still be an impressive record.

Rin nodded her head in agreement as she stood beside His Highness.

“I also think that the [No Name]s are quite an interesting treasure trove of talents.”

“Yep. If there’s a chance to meet again……I will play with them then.”

With that, the both of them disappeared together.

There was no trace of them left behind at their original positions aside from the hundreds of Demonic Beast corpses that littered the area around the Outer Gate.

Part 4

---Ancient Vampire Citadel, Elliptical Orbit Throne Room.

Kasukabe Yō couldn't figure out the meaning.

She had read the Geass Roll from top to bottom repeatedly before turning to fix her eyes on Leticia.

"……what's up with this?"

"It's just as what is written on it. Twelve minutes from now, the Veil of Little Garden will be released and the Sun rays will pour down. With that, the huge Dragon will disappear due to the Sun's rays and return to the sun's elliptical path."

Just like the night that it appeared from the starry skies, the huge dragon will also return to the Sea of Stars.

However, if the veil were to be released, it would mean that the Sun's rays would shine straight into the City of Little Garden---

"……what will happen to Leticia?"

Silence echoed as Leticia closed her eyes before breaking it with a regretful tone to tell the truth:

"---most probably die. I'm the medium for the Dragon. As you can all see, the ceiling of the throne is made of crystal and I would definitely get a direct dose of Sunlight."

"……but didn't you say that it's only to render you powerless……"

"It's a lie."

Leticia gave her honest reply with an emotionless look.

Yō couldn't control herself anymore and she reached out, wanting to grab Leticia by the collar but her hands easily passed through.

"This…This is……"

"Haven't I already said it? My body is the Dragon's medium. The 'me' who sits upon the throne is only a bait to lure invaders. In other words, I'm just an apparition of sorts. Originally, if one were to touch 'me', my shadow would manifest to defeat the opponent……but it seems that it was already defeated by Izayoi."

Leticia gave a bitter laugh as she looked towards Izayoi.

Izayoi only narrowed his eyes while turning his head aside. Not replying to her words.

Yō bent her head before the throne while her hands couldn't stop trembling. Using her strength to squeeze out her words that were filled with suppressed emotions:

"……So this game had all along been set……for Leticia to die regardless of the clearing condition chosen?"

"Yes. Without an equivalent risk, how can there be such violent and evil punishments listed in the Game. To forsake the victory of the Host, to forsake being saved and released…lastly to forsake life itself and disappear without a trace."

"Uu….!"

"Guys, I'm sorry to have used this method to force you to accomplish this painful task. But please understand that I didn't want to experience….killing my comrades again."

Leticia shook her radiant golden hair while smiling in a way that seemed as though a burden had been removed from her shoulders. Everyone in the room seemed to be unable to find anything else to say. The thunderclouds outside the Citadel could be seen swirling like a whirlpool that added to the pressurizing presence of the huge Dragon. If Leticia had been honest from the start, the time for the Game being cleared would have been delayed. And that would have meant placing more burden on Asuka and Sala who had to continue waging the battle on the ground surface.

Every minute and second of indecisiveness would have extorted its price from [Underwood] and the [Draco Greif] Alliance and probably lead to their annihilation.

"……!"

Come to think about it, Leticia had been very dedicated to the Community to the point of being unusual.

With her Divinity taken away, Authority taken away and even to be sold like an item on auctions.

To rush to the aid of her Community, she would even pay such a tremendous price. Perhaps somewhere deep in Leticia's heart, she had already developed a compulsive habit to atone for the sins of having killed her comrades.

"……!"

Taking the brand a Demon Lord, one would be destined to walk the road to ruin.

Hence it was normal to have such an ending. And it was one that didn't have any grounds to be disputed or discussed about.

Even so---Kasuakbe Yō lifted her face, unwilling to give up.

"……I understand Leticia now." Dragging her battered body, Yō shuffled away while looking at the throne.

Feeling a little guilty, Leticia lowered her gaze but in the next moment, a fierce determination burned in Yō's eyes.

"To put it simply, I will just have to pierce through the huge dragon's heart before the Veil is released right?"

"……Ai?"

Leticia looked up abruptly, doubting her own hearing.

However, Yō continued to look at Leticia with her determined eyes---

"Leticia's not wrong. We had needed to clear the condition as fast as possible earlier for that would be for the best to Asuka and all the others engaged in battle on the ground…… And now that your aim has been achieved, what comes next will be my responsibility alone."

Dragging her badly burnt leg, Yō faced her back towards the throne.

The coloration on Leticia's face immediately paled as she frantically pleaded to the others in the throne room:

"Some…SOMEONE STOP HER! THAT CHILD IS SERIOUS! She's serious… She plans on fighting the huge Dragon!"

The apparition of Leticia though bounded by chains was so frantic that she seemed to be struggling to get out of her seat. But needless to say, Izayoi did not make a move to stop Yō and neither did Jack or Garol.

Izayoi gave a shrug of his shoulders before moving over to lend a shoulder to Yō with a smile creeping across his lips.

“Well, since Leticia also said it, I will just ask to confirm it once more---Are you really serious about it?”

“Nn.”

“Is that so? Then let me join you.”

“Izayoi! Even…Even you’re starting to sprout nonsense?!”

“Well, it’s all her fault for saying that she wants to defeat a huge dragon……Haiz, seeing how lifeless she was earlier, I can’t possibly stand by and see Kasukabe die alone just for our depressed and self-depreciating maid right?”

Izayoi shook his head helplessly and his eyes continued to be mirthless.

This guy is serious. Realizing that point, Leticia drew a sharp breath and shouted at the top of her lungs:

“THAT’S SO STUPID……I’VE BEEN WRONG ABOUT YOU , IZAYOI. I ACTUALLY THOUGHT THAT YOU WERE A CLEVER MAN WHOM I COULD ENTRUST THE COMMUNITY TO! BUT YOU ACTUALLY SAID SUCH IRRESPONSIBLE WORDS!”

“Nn, yeah. I’m not only allowing my comrade to continue to their deaths but I will also follow in her footsteps. It’s clearly a show of irresponsibility……but those that did not even intend to take the responsibility in the first place, can only be called cowardly and despicable.”

Izayoi’s angry gaze seemed to pierce Leticia.

For in fact, those words were beating around the bush to fire an insult at Leticia of ‘You are a cowardly and despicable person’. And Leticia who understood the words between the lines was stumped for words.

“Kasukabe’s right. You did nothing wrong. And Kasukabe did nothing wrong as well…… But, I will choose to help the latter. Compared to a self-sacrificial saint, I would feel a hundred times much happier to save a brave soul who is reckless and unable to comprehend things as well as you.”

Izayoi tightened his grip on Yō’s shoulder that was filled with cuts and bruises. These were the wounds that told of Yō’s determination in the gamble of her battle.

But the person whom it should concern the most, whom it was for……the Hime who was imprisoned did not notice that sincerity, the feelings of others and had trampled over it with a rejection.

Izayoi couldn’t forgive her for this slow-uptake on another’s feelings.

“As long as it’s not completely a tragedy yet, I shall use my two hands to twist it into a comedy---So, prepare yourself to awaken to the truth for we will defeat the huge dragon---and the task of saving you shall be executed perfectly to the end!”

“Am I right?” Izayoi asked Yō with a smile.

And Yō gave the brightest smile in reply.

Part 5

---[Underwood], Foot of the Great Tree.

The proclamation of victory that appeared on the Geass Roll raised the morale of all the Participants.

Pressing down on her red hair that was messed up by the winds, Sala pointed to the [Draco Greif] Flag while shouting:

“We have obtained victory! What’s left is only to chase out these disorganized bunches! Comrades! We have come to the last part of our battle! Bear Arms and let’s give them all we’ve got!”

The sounds of celebratory and war cries shook the roots of the entire Great Tree. And comrades who had been worn out from the long battles surged forth with renewed vigor to push back at the Demonic Beasts.

Asuka was one of them but her fighting spirit was boosted due to another reason.

The reason? It is more than obvious. For it didn’t take much for Asuka, a person who wasn’t up there at the scene, to figure it out for herself. To figure out the effects of the released veil on Leticia.

Even so, Asuka did not doubt in the victory. Strictly speaking, she believed in the victory where no one would be lost.

Izayoi-san ……Kasukabe-san will definitely not leave Leticia to die…

Even if from the results, one would see that Leticia’s life was to be forfeited.

That would still be the result of their utmost efforts.

For up till the moment when they could walk with pride and look at each other without regrets---Asuka will continue to hold on to her belief.

“---Quick! Look up! The huge Dragon is descending once more!”

“It’s swooping lower this time!”

“Could it…Could it be planning to attack [Underwood]---!”

Fear and confusion gripped the army.

Amongst the combatants, Asuka silently steeled her resolve.

And that was ……to stand up and block that huge Dragon on her own.

Part 6

---Ancient Vampire Citadel, the Cliff of the Sky.

Izayoi and Yō's actions were swift. Since they had a common goal and enemy, there wasn't a need to waste any more time discussing about it. Izayoi stared into Yō's eyes while making his request directly:

"I will strike through the huge Dragon's heart. Can you fly me over?"

"Nn……Ah, but please wait a moment."

Having a flash of inspiration, Yō took out her [Genome Tree] to hold in her hands. During the combat with Graiya, she had been in a subconscious state but things were different now. Yō retraced the paths of that time, using the millions of DNA in the Phylogenetic tree to pick out the condensation of miracles that would constitute a life form.

Previously I had done it in a subconscious state……but this time I've got to do the choosing more meticulously for the structure.

Yō held much trepidation and high expectation for her new power. The staff that she had hastily put together successfully in her first attempt had displayed a power that she had never seen in Eudemons before.

In other words, as long as the combinations were correctly in place, it would be able to draw out the power of unknown Eudemons.

The mystery surrounding the amalgamated beast was still scary and weighted down upon her……but there wasn't time for her to dwell on those. Currently, the most important task would be to transport Izayoi……So, complicated equations were out

of the question and it only needed to model after a Eudemon that can fly in the skies at a fast speed!

The [Genome Tree] continued to morph and surround Yō's legs with a bright light.

And as the light slowly dimmed, it revealed her usual tall leather boots covered with a mail coat of silvery scales and white shimmery wings that sparkled as they sprouted near the front of the boots.

"It's complete!"

Yō had used her [Genome Tree] to imitate the appearance of a majestic beast that she had not seen before---Boots of Pegasus, and she turned to face Izayoi.

"Sorry for the wait. Next, I will just have to……Izayoi?"

Izayoi had stared at her wordlessly while blinking a few times as his eyes were fastened upon her boots with unhidden interest that would have seemed rude. Drawing a sharp intake of breath he looked at Yō with sparkling eyes:

"……that's really impressive, what's that? It looks really magnificent!"

"Is…Is that so? Really cool?"

"Yeah, super cool!"

They gave each other a thumbs up. And it would seem that this was the first time that they were so in synch with each other.

But Yō's face immediately clouded over with worry as she asked with a somewhat troubled tone in her voice:

“But all I can do is to bring you over. Izayoi, is it okay……to leave all the rest to you…?”

“Leave it to me. Since Kasukabe has shown me quite a sight, I will just have to show my true abilities as well.”

“……is that so? Then let’s go.”

“No problem” Izayoi nodded his head in assent.

In the next moment, the huge dragon began its rapid descend.

Part 7

---Ancient Vampire Citadel, Elliptical Orbit Throne Room

Leticia stared up at the ceiling constructed with crystals in a daze after having sent the two figures off with her eyes.

Originally having wished for it to come earlier, even if by a second, if the Sun would quickly appear, it would be able to burn this body.

If her comrades lost their lives during this time ……she would really be unable to rest in peace.

Izayoi….Yō… Why must you do such a stupid thing……!

She tossed the words of the man who had appeared before her acceptance of the Demon Lord's branding in her mind.

Every time that she chewed on those words, Leticia would feel a stab in her heart.

"---Shouting to protect things that you aren't able to protect, making a fuss about wanting to save those that cannot be saved?! Those are just acts of a clown! How can you not even understand that point……"

Leticia clenched her teeth and leaned forward seeming in an attempt to curl into a ball. Perhaps it was such a move that Garol couldn't continue to watch anymore that he approached from her side and slowly gave a nod to himself.

"Yes. Shouting to protect things that you aren't able to protect, making a fuss about wanting to save those that cannot be saved?! Those are just acts of a clown!---but Leticia. Those who can do that……are undoubtedly heroes."

"But….But…"

“And didn’t we also walk alongside those guys till now? About those two children, don’t you have any confidence in them?”

Garol asked in a warm tone, just like a parent teaching a child.

Leticia was unable to rebuke to that and could only turn her face away with an expression that seemed close to crying.

“You do not wish to kill your comrades. I’m sure that those children understand your feelings and hence place their lives at risk to save you.”

“……Garol.”

“Leticia, let’s believe in them. Those children……will surely save you from the karma of the Demon Lord’s branding.”

Part 8

---[Underwood], Foot of the Great Tree.

The huge dragon opened its wide jaws to the maximum as it rushed down towards the South Eastern Plains. And just before crashing into the ground, it suddenly veered upwards and changed its course to charge towards the Great Tree with a loud roar.

Asuka and Deen had placed themselves at the fore front with Asuka injecting all her Spirit powers into her words to shout a command.

“DEEN! MAXIMIZE YOUR SIZE TO THE LIMITS! QUICKLY!”

“DEEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEN!”

The body of over thirty feet continued to expand under Asuka’s command. The hollow in the body continued to be injected with Heat and Soul, causing it to grow to the height that came close to that of the Great Tree.

Asuka knew it in her heart that Deen who had expanded to the size of the huge Dragon’s skull would still be unable to contest it in a battle of strength.

With just my command alone, Deen’s mass wouldn’t be able to increase more than tenfold……

That’s right. This was something that had been tested. In fact, normal Rare Sacred Irons would not increase in mass even if they increased in size but with Asuka’s command, the Rare Sacred Iron could only increase to ten times its actual mass at the very most.

Although the main reason is that the spiritual power that forms the core of the Rare Sacred Iron to increase the weight needed to be proportional to the spiritual shell that it is to be injected into, the compatibility of Asuka's power in Gifts to manipulate weight was also much lower.

Asuka's [Authority] is a localized and momentary swelling of the spiritual power.

Just like the Gift of the Water Tree that could control the amount of water to be released or absorbed, or that of the Rare Sacred Iron, the effects were only temporary.

"But……I will just have to fight it head-on!"

"Stop! Asuka! Have you lost your mind?!"

Sala fanned her flaming wings as she came up beside Asuka.

She had pulled Asuka's hand to turn her around to awaken to reality, but Asuka clearly rejected Sala's warning with a shake of her head.

"No! [Underwood] is just behind us!"

"I know! Even though I know that, I've still come to bring you away!"

"I also know of the results!"

"What results are you referring to?! That sort of action can only be deemed as suicide!"

"I won't mind even if it's suicidal! For I know that I will regret for all my life if I run from here!"

Asuka shook off Sala's hand while meeting her gaze with determination reflected in her eyes.

"If the huge Dragon destroyed [Underwood] now……All my friends will be sad. So I will not retreat!"

Asuka knew that Kuro Usagi, Izayoi, Yō, Sala ……and Leticia who's also the victimizer, all of them would feel hurt by its destruction.

And that was something that was more important than the responsibility given to her. So she would not stand down and will not bow down to the fear wrought by the arrival of the huge Dragon.

Hearing Asuka's determined words directly, Sala only widened her eyes and she gave a soft sigh.

"……You will not back down?"

"I will not."

"……not even if you die?"

"……I would rather die."

Asuka continued to assert her firm resolution and the Red Metal doll also seemed to have been influenced by its owner's determination as it took on a stance in preparation for the battle. The message conveyed by the atmosphere around these two was clear---even if it was a battle that they would surely lose, they would not shy away from it.

It would seem that nothing said would ever stop their choice of staying.

They had already set their minds to give their all in a gamble for the sake of defending [Underwood].

With things the way they were now, it would be useless to say anything more.

Finally, Sala also set her resolve---

"---I got it. Then, let me display a similar determination……!"

Drawing her sword, Sala chopped off one of her Dragon Horns that was the symbolic glory of the Dragons.

Her scarlet hair were slick with her blood and was dyed a bright red.

At that moment---Asuka was so shocked that she couldn't understand what she just witnessed and could only stand at her original spot numbly.

"What……"

'What are you doing…' Never made it out of her mouth fully for Asuka having witnessed Sala's determination, could not bring herself to say such words.

Sala fell forward into Asuka's arms as she handed her the Dragon Horn while struggling with her words through suppressing her pain:

"……Dragon Horn…is of a high and pure Spirit level…Should be able to integrate with Rare Sacred Iron……!"

"But…But….Even so, it's not guaranteed that it will be enough to block the huge Dragon……!"

Asuka rocked Sala's shoulders in grief. But Sala who was already experiencing a clouding of her consciousness managed to give a shake of her head and get her words out:

"If its Asuka……will surely block it……! I'll be leaving [Underwood] in your hands……"

Having said that, Sala lost her consciousness and slumped against Asuka.

Trembling as she hugged Sala tightly, Asuka passed the Dragon Horn to Deen.

And as the Dragon Horn that emitted pure Spiritual power integrated into Deen's armor, the empty core started to spew out a hot reddish wind current.

That was the Gift that Sala had developed over the period of two hundred years.

That sort of feelings must not be wasted, no matter what may come.

Continuing to hug the unconscious Sala tightly, Asuka shouted with all her feelings in a turmoil:

“---DEEN! MEET THE ATTACK OF THE DRAGON HEAD-ON!”

“DEEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeEEEEEEEEEN!”

The hollow at its centre spewed out hot air currents that glowed with a red tinge as Deen charged forward at the Dragon.

Using its strong arm to grab the lower jaw of the huge Dragon and wedging the top jaw with another arm, Deen blocked the huge Dragon’s charge with a weight that caused the earth below its feet to form huge depressions. Though the huge Dragon which measured much longer than the circumference of a Mountain and River still managed to push Deen back a little, it was clear that the Iron Doll was still putting up a fight against it.

As the armor plate on the shoulder started to crack, the legs that were under much friction and pressure had started to wear out as well. And it was just a matter of time before the thick arm would be bitten off by the huge Dragon’s jaw. Even so, Deen did not retreat, couldn’t retreat.

Asuka hugged Sala who was now dyed in blood as she shouted with all her might:

“HOLD IT THEREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAHHHHH!”

“---

GYEEEEEEEEEYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaEEEEEEEEEEEEYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaa!”

The huge Dragon also gave a loud roar while tightly clamping its jaws over the Red Iron Doll's right arm.

Using the chance to free its left arm, Deen took the opportunity to give an uppercut to the huge Dragon from below and sent the huge Dragon head flying upwards to the height above the Great Tree.

The huge Dragon did not release its hold on the arm and flew upwards with Deen hanging out of its mouth.

---Just then, Asuka who had also been brought into the skies looked up at the skies.

Following the release of the Veil, the sea of dark clouds dispersed like smoke in the wind under the rays of the Sun.

And the Dragon that was being called towards the opening in the Veil was starting to dissolve in the dazzling Sunlight.

---The materialization of the Zodiac, the huge Dragon that appeared from the Sun's elliptical orbit in the Heavens……was returning to the Sea of Stars.

As the enormous body started to become translucent, the regal light carved upon its heart started to become visible.

自己犠牲の出来る聖者よりも、
物分かりの悪い勇者になる。
そして、
完膚なきまでに救ってみせる！
逆廻十六夜
久遠飛鳥
春日部耀

"Izayoi: Compared to a self-sacrificial saint, I would feel a hundred times much happier to save a brave soul who is reckless and unable to comprehend things as well as you. And, the task of saving you shall be executed perfectly to the end!"

A dazzling silvery-white comet carrying Izayoi had chased up to it, seeming to have awaited for this moment.

“Found it……THE THIRTEENTH SUN!”

Izayoi converged the light that he had suppressed with both his hands up till then into a pillar and shot it through the huge Dragon’s heart.

The huge Dragon never had the chance to give out a dying scream as it quietly disappeared in the light. In an attempt to protect Leticia from the harmful Sun’s rays, Yō tightly hugged the other Sun that had dropped out of the huge Dragon’s heart as she raised her right hand high in the air.

Epilogue

Part 1

---[Underwood] Main VIP room, Great Tree Water Gate

Two days later, Leticia finally came to. Perhaps it was the noise of the nearby Water Gate that was so loud that it awoke her.

"……ah, you've awoken?"

The person before her, watching over her while she was out of it was Kasukabe Yō who displayed a normal quiet air around her as she sat beside the bed while grooming Calico Cat's fur.

"……I---"

"There's nothing out of the ordinary with your body, just that you've been sleeping for two to three days."

Yō gave Calico's chin a scratch.

"……Could it be that you've been waiting here for me to awaken all this time?"

"Not all this time but as much as possible. Since you were out of it, wouldn't it be really disorienting and worrying if you were to wake up to find no one around you? So we had been taking shifts to sit here beside you."

"……taking shifts?" Leticia got up slightly from her bed as she asked.

Just then, Kuro Usagi suddenly burst into the room with a "Klunk!"

"Yō-san! I've come to change shifts with you……Ah! Leticia-sama! You've awoken!"

"Nn. I just did."

"Is… Is that so….?! Then Kuro Usagi will now call everyone to come over!"

Kuro Usagi gave a happy shout before rushing out of the room.

Watching how lively and noisy she was, Leticia couldn't help but feel an indescribable sense of nostalgia.

"During the time that I was chained to the throne, I had already prepared myself for death……Really. I've underestimated you guys."

"That's right. So Leticia must serve us well from now on……for we are comrades of the same Community after all."

Yō seemed to smile shyly before standing up.

"Oh right, the Harvest Festival seems to be in the process of being re-hosted. Although the Underground city is wrecked quite badly, I heard that the stage will be based at the Great Tree and there will be various Gift Games of all sorts being hosted."

"……Is that so? Hehe, that sounds promising."

"Nn. I will also apply to participate in the <Hippocamp Riders>, so I will be leaving for now. I will be back with the others shortly."

Yō gave a brilliant smile that Leticia had never seen before as she walked out.

Using a hand to cover that back that seemed to shine as bright as the Sun, Leticia's tears pricked the sides of her eyes.

"……I see. So my Sun doesn't only exist in the skies."

Holding onto the fulfilling and blessed feeling in her heart, Leticia entered the world of the dreams once more.

The next time that she awoke was the start of the Harvest Festival. Leticia thought of walking with her comrades who shone as brightly as the Sun towards their tomorrow as she allowed herself to be carried freely into the folds of sweet dreams.

Part 2

---[Underwood] Harvest Festival General Headquarters.

“Izayoi-san! Jin-bocchan! Leticia-sama has awaken!”

Klunk! Kuro Usagi pushed open the doors while charging in energetically.

In the General Headquarters, there was still another person besides Izayoi and Jin---the female assistant of [Thousand Eyes] gave a cold glare to welcome Kuro Usagi.

“…… You are still so presumptuous and free aren’t you?”

“Well, just overlook it. After all that is just a part of Kuro Usagi’s charm.”

The female shop assistant gave a sigh while Izayoi had that slight smile on his face as usual.

Not expecting to see the female shop assistant in this place, Kuro Usagi blushed red to her rabbit ears in embarrassment while greeting the female shop assistant:

“It’s…It’s been a while hasn’t it? I didn’t expect you to participate in the Harvest Festival……”

"No. I've just arrived at [Underwood] and it's because I'm being dispatched from [Thousand Eyes] as a special message bearer." The female shop assistant straightened her posture at that point.

Come to look at it, she did look different today with her resplendent kimono unlike her usual dressing of an apron and dress, and had even put on some light make-up that wouldn't cause others to feel distasteful when looking at it.

Taking out a classical rolled scroll document, the shop assistant gave an exaggerated clearing of her throat---

"Shiroyasha-sama has decreed 'For the accomplishments of everyone present here in this crusade against the Demon Lord, I will be gifting you a reward'."

"What? Besides the subordination of Leticia, there's still another reward?"

"Yes. Originally, the subordination of Demon Lord Leticia and the Authority over Ophiuchus were supposed to go together……but the Constellation is only something that can be loaned to the [Floor Master] to be used and naturally won't be given to a mere Community. Hence this reward based on your merits will be a way to compensate for that reason."

I see. Izayoi nodded his head in understanding. Lazily leaning on the back of the chair, Izayoi had not thought for anything that he really wanted and he turned his gaze to the other two.

"Kuro Usagi and ochibi-sama, do you have anything that you want?"

"Kuro…Kuro Usagi has nothing that she wants. Moreover, this time she didn't really participate in the Game."

“Is that so? What about ochibi-sama?”

“Yes there is.”

Jin gave a quick answer, seeming to have awaited for the question. And that caused Izayoi to feel a little surprised and intrigued.

Leaning forward towards the long table, Izayoi asked in curiosity:

“It sure seems rare for ochibi-sama to want a reward. What’s this thing that ochibi-sama desires for?”

“Well…..It’s not like I really desire for it a lot. It’s just that we of the [No Name]s have been building up quite a reputation and I think that it’s about time that we moved on to the next step……”

Izayoi widened his eyes in surprise and the other two in the room were just as surprised as him.

Up till today, the [No Name]’s course of action and the method of reputation building has mainly been planned by Izayoi. And for Jin who wasn’t one who would usually speak up to give a suggestion on the proposed plans to talk about moving to the next step, it really was appalling.

Izayoi who maintained his earlier posture, gave a tilt of his head quizzically.

“……Ochibi-sama? What are you planning?”

The room was quiet at that point for it wasn’t only Izayoi who wanted to know the answer.

Seeming to feel a little awkward at the sudden focus on him, Jin gave a little cough before saying his request of the reward:

“There’s two things that I want:

One, to allow the [No Name] to rise to a six digit Community.

Two, to return the Community grounds and facilities that used to belong to the [No Name] in the Six-digit lands---that’s it.”

The trio frowned at that. Hearing the request, the reaction of the female shop assistant was not only that of a refusal but a stare at him in contempt.

“What a joke. If you wanted to rise to the Six digits, you cannot be without a Flag hanging from your Outer Gate. For a Nameless Community to request for such a special treatment---.”

“No, we will be creating a new Flag and it will not be under the situation where we will need to disband our original Community, but to prepare a new Flag.”

“Hah?” The female shop assistant’s tone and volume had gone up at that. And Kuro Usagi was also confused at that as she tilted her rabbit ears in a troubled expression.

Only Izayoi who had caught on to the plan gave a loud praise, having concurred to Jin’s suggestion:

“I see……you mean that method? Oh my, it might just work now! If it wasn’t for the fame that we have now, there wouldn’t be that method available for us.”

“Yes. It’s by using that method. We can create a Flag without having to disband our current Community.”

The both of them gave a nod to each other that seemed to assent with each other’s thoughts. Kuro Usagi and the female shop assistant who had yet to figure out what they were talking about looked at each other in doubt.

Izayoi gave a hearty laugh while telling the two confused people the answer:

“If we do not have a Flag of our own, we will just have to make one Flag of an organization of Communities to replace that empty space.”

“That’s right. That is our own way for [No Name] to obtain the Flag--- The Creation of an Alliance Flag.”